

**CROSSING BOUNDARIES: GENDER AND GENRE DISLOCATIONS IN
SELECTED TEXTS BY SAMUEL R. DELANY**

by

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I declare that

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is my own work, and that all the sources that I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.



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AUGUST 2001
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Summary:

This dissertation offers an examination of Delany's critical trajectory from structuralism to poststructuralism and postmodernism across a gamut of genres from SF to sword-and-sorcery, pornography, autobiography and literary criticism. Delany's engagement with semiotics, Foucault and deconstruction form the theoretical focus, together with his own theories of how SF functions as a literary genre, and its standing and reception within the greater realm of literature. The impact of Delany as a gay, black SF writer is also examined against the backdrop of his varied output. I have used the term 'dislocation' to describe Delany's tackling of traditional subjects and genres, and opening them up to further possibilities through critical engagement. Lastly, Delany is also examined as a postmodern icon. A frequent participant in his own texts, as well using pseudonyms that have developed into fully-fledged characters, Delany has become a critical signifier in his own work.

Key terms:

Structuralism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, science fiction, Foucault, deconstruction, gay, gender, literary theory, autobiography

Visionary Power
Attends upon the motion of the winds
Embodied in the mystery of words;
There darkness makes abode, and all the host
Of shadowy things do work their changes there,
As in a mansion like their proper home;
Even forms and substances are circumfused
By that transparent veil with light divine;
And through the turnings intricate of Verse,
Present themselves as objects recognised,
In flashes, and with a glory scarce their own.

William Wordsworth
The Prelude, Book Five, 619–629

for the other 'D' in my life

Deirdre

and to Craig

**for not minding being
lower in the alphabet**

Introduction

The Seeds of Deconstruction

An authoritative reference work on science fiction (SF) begins its entry on Samuel R. Delany by describing him as a “US author and critic, one of the most influential and most discussed within the genre”,¹ who achieved ‘fame’ as one of SF’s “youthful prodigies” (Clute 1993:15). What is interesting about this statement is its conflation of the categories of author and critic, suggesting that the one is inseparable from the other, while giving no indication of how the two terms evolved, or how they are separate or disparate from each other. Delany’s output as a youth is also seen as synonymous with his attendant fame, placing his later work as an older man in the shadow of this early ascendancy. Once again, there is no indication of the evolution of the writer both as an artist and as an individual. Instead, Delany is pinned down to the dissecting board of critical scrutiny at one particular moment of his career and life, namely that of youthful prodigy, which is seen as the definitive moment of everything that he was up to then, and would later aspire to.

What is equally fascinating is that the entry begins by emphasising Delany’s academic achievements before detailing his oeuvre, with the result that his work as a scholar and critic is foregrounded, and his fictions and other writings placed in the background as a sort of attendant underpinning or propping up. In a genre often portrayed as being populist – in addition to the bulk of its consumers being seen as youthful – the initial impression of Delany conveyed by the entry is that of a serious thinker pursued more for his critical and literary elucidation and insight than for entertainment purposes.² The first piece of biographical information provided is the

¹ John Clute makes a similar assessment, stating that Delany’s “most important work in recent decades may well be pedagogical” (1995:169). Clute goes so far as to say that Delany has become “something of a guru”, with “his pronouncements on issues of gender, race, genre, and politics” receiving much scrutiny (1995:169). Writing in an earlier, and no less influential, reference work, Brian Aldiss gives some insight into the impact Delany made when he burst onto the SF scene in the early 1960s: “Much has subsequently been written about the *meaning* of Delany’s work ... but what impressed at first reading was style, sheer style! The ideas were familiar fifties models ... but the manner of expression transformed the tired images and scenes” (1986:367).

² It is probable that many young readers encountering Delany for the first time today will be aware of his academic reputation at the outset. This is in contrast to my own personal experience, for example. My first encounter with Delany was via *The Jewels of Apor*, read when I was a teenager, and with no prior knowledge of the author. I liked it immensely – it was stylish, exciting, and exotic – and carried on reading. It was only when I bought and read *The Motion of Light in Water* that I became aware of Delany’s equally stylish, exciting, and exotic background. Up to then I had not even known for sure that he was black. Later when I studied English at university, and went through the grinding mill of being taught literary theory, I

fact that Delany has taught at several universities, thereby emphasising his role as educator and teacher as opposed to being a spinner of popular SF yarns. The entry then gives a brief account of what it terms Delany's "somewhat mixed cultural background":

Black, born and raised in Harlem, New York, and therefore familiar with the Black ghetto; but his father, a wealthy funeral-parlour proprietor, had the family brought up in privileged, upper-middle-class circumstances – SRD was educated at the prestigious Bronx High School of Science (although he left college after only one term). This double background is evident in all his writing. (Clute 1993:315)

Such a textbook background of political correctness seems automatically to imply a certain socio-political context to Delany's work, but it is important to note that he chose to sublimate his very real 'otherness' by writing in a genre where 'otherness' has been transmuted into the 'alien'. With the publication of his first novel, the background delineated above was unknown, and the book could only be judged on its own merits – which, indeed, it was, and very successfully.³ The entry then continues by stating it was "in the mid-1970s that it became generally known that SRD was bisexual" (1993:316).

Actually, Delany is homosexual, but this statement refers to the brief period when he was married to fellow child prodigy Marilyn Hacker, who is Jewish, and they produced a child. The use of the word 'bisexual' seems a delicate way of introducing this controversial aspect of Delany's character, especially in a genre whose very populism defines its inherent conservatism. SF readers may well obtain a frisson of titillation by reading about the copulatory mechanics of alien beings, but it is an altogether different story when they discover that these were extrapolated from the writer's own marginal sexual practices, as this challenges social conventions and morality.

returned to earlier works like *Babel-17*, and was able to enjoy them all over again, and to a far richer extent. In this way I have been fortunate to follow Delany's entire career as he continued to weave a rich pattern of experimentation and consolidation. Today, no doubt, there are many readers who only read Delany's now-infrequent SF, those who only read his literary theory and criticism, or those who only read his now-frequent gay fiction and polemic. This progression has been inevitable, for Delany's interests are too many and varied to appeal to a homogenous audience. It is also ironic, for the purveyor of structuralism in SF has become his own transcendental signified, dissolved in the peripheries of a marginal genre.

³ One of Delany's favourite themes is the enigma of return; how objects, events, and even circumstances change through the act of observation or revisitation. Similarly, scholars have been returning to Delany's early works with very insightful results. For example, Gregory Rutledge teases out *Babel-17*'s contribution to the Black consciousness movement, though he nearly scuppers his own premise with the horrendous pun that "Delany is surely a Chip off the Black Power/Arts movements block" (2000:138).

It is in this unique intersection of imagination and reality, driven by Delany's own unique position as a marginalised individual working in a marginal genre, that he assumes particular relevance to redefining SF as a genre, and ultimately the role of the author as well.⁴ An academic; black; and gay – the diversity of Delany's background is reflected in the diversity of his output. He published his first novel, *The Jewels of Apor*, in 1962 at the age of 20, which began an eclectic career that has seen him produce everything from graphic novels to sword-and-sorcery, pornography, and autobiography, as well as literary and SF criticism. Many brave attempts have been made to affirm the 'essential' Delany by categorising him through his work, and engaging in various levels of theoretical speculation. Notable in this regard are Peplow and Bravard's 1980 biography, and George Slusser's 1977 structural analysis of a few early novels.

I believe that an ideal assessment of Delany's influence and impact on SF and its relation to literature and critical theory in general would combine biography and theory as part of a single dialectic, with the two strands binding each other together, and simultaneously strengthening each other. There are so many facets to Delany that it is tempting to focus on only one in trying to comprehend the complex and enigmatic nature of his authorial, personal, and theoretical selves.⁵ But in order to do the subject justice, all the facets and their intersections have to be considered, and therefore I have chosen the term 'dislocation' to describe what I perceive as the particular literary effect that Delany has managed to perfect.

The *Concise Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'dislocation' as the process of "disturbing the normal connection of" (Sykes 1982:276), or disruption. One can see from the outset how this would apply to Delany: his 'normal connection' with SF – that is, as a practitioner of the genre, using its tropes, conventions, and all the other literary paraphernalia that constitutes it as a genre – is recomplicated by bringing his

⁴ Perhaps 'redefining' suggests that Delany was the first to lay claim to the literary qualities of SF. Of course, this ignores the rich history of SF criticism, including such luminaries as Darko Suvin and Robert Scholes. What Delany has done can, perhaps, best be described as re-appropriating, or reinventing, the genre on his own terms, and for his own ends.

⁵ A fascinating, and frustrating, aspect of this is that Delany contributes actively to his own fragmentation and dissolution, through the invention of various fictional personae, pseudonyms, and sometimes conflicting biographical information. One assumes, logically, that there must be an 'essential' Delany, as tangible as his own flesh, but then, bearing in mind the deconstruction of logocentrism, one has to acknowledge that Delany has no 'centre'. The play between signifier and signified is, indeed, endless. And, in the spirit of the word 'play', Delany has engaged in this postmodern game with much verve and audacity: his alternate authorial 'voices', SL Kermit and K Leslie Steiner, have become 'characters' in their own right. And on the margin lurks the Author, endlessly deferred, eternally present.

particular background into play in the arena of his fictional endeavours. For example, one can read *Babel-17* as a simple and colourful space opera, the genre's own unique term for what literature generally terms a potboiler, but on a deeper level it raises questions about gender and genre that extend the traditional boundaries of SF.

This is a question of identity: SF's own identity as a particular literary genre; Delany's own identity as a certain writer of SF; and how these identities interact with, and reflect, each other. In this context, another definition of 'dislocation' is provided by Ernest Laclau, who states that "every identity is dislocated insofar as it depends on an outside which both denies that identity and provides its condition of possibility at the same time" (1990:39). In other words, SF has a particular identity as a marginal literary genre in relation to the greater corpus of literature, while Delany's own relationship to SF, and literature in general, is refracted and mediated by his own particular 'outside' – that is, his status of multiple marginality in being black and gay.⁶

In this sense, dislocation is the interface or boundary between an individual identity and its social context. Laclau notes that the term has negative and positive connotations: it is a boundary containing that which it seeks to define, and a frontier holding out the possibility of extending that boundary in arbitrary directions (1990:39). Thus "the constitution of any identity is based on the exclusion of that which denies it" (1990:33). Laclau applies the term 'dislocation' as a means "to study the conditions of existence of a given social identity", meaning an examination of the power mechanisms that give rise to such a particular identity (1990:32). The duality implied by the term is a reflection of Jacques Derrida's notion of binary opposites:

... an identity's constitution is always based on excluding something and establishing a violent hierarchy between the two resultant poles – form/matter, essence/accident, black/white, man/woman, etc. (Laclau 1990:32)

⁶ It is difficult to decide as to whether Delany's status as an academic entrenches his marginality even further, or eases his mainstream acceptance. SF is a popular genre, read by young people, for whom its main appeals are colour and escapism. Delany is certainly colourful, but his academic endeavours are unlikely to generate broad appeal in the mass of SF readership. On the other hand, he is also a peculiarly unacademic character: a college drop-out, with no formal tertiary qualifications, and a predilection for the perverse and the sublime, wherever he may find them. But his academic work has definitely entrenched his reputation in literature in general. The lesson, I suppose, is that what is marginal in one sense can become totally the opposite in a different context; yet another flirtatious postmodern inversion. This sense of embracing one position and its exact opposite, both at the same instant, while simultaneously denying both, is typical of Delany.

Just as social identity is defined by that which it excludes, so can a social institution be seen as trailing traces or supplements of its dislocated 'identity' or contextual meaning. If identity is a social construct, it then stands to reason that social institutions are simply aggregates or concretisations of social forces that have become 'sedimented' or entrenched over time. That is, they are unquestioned and taken as givens of the social landscape. In relation to Delany, he teases open the conventional notion that SF is a given of the literary landscape, and attempts to show how, as a construct, it is constituted from various interactive elements; and how, in turn, those elements themselves are comprised. This is the practice of dislocation or deconstruction:⁷

Insofar as an act of institution has been successful, a 'forgetting of the origins' tends to occur, the system of possible alternatives tends to vanish and the traces of the original contingency to fade. In this way, the institution tends to assume the form of a mere objective presence. This is the moment of sedimentation. (Laclau 1990:34)

Beyond individual identity and social institution, it needs to be asked: "To what extent is a certain society a society?" (1990:36), for this is the larger arena in which 'otherness' is constituted. Laclau explains that this means determining how a society conceals the system of exclusion that has given rise to it, which means being aware of the powerful force of dislocation, and how it both disrupts and constitutes individual and social identity.

Laclau notes, rather pessimistically, that "a reconciled and transparent society" is a myth due to the unevenness and opacity of power relations (1990:35), but adds that this idea contains the seeds of a radical transformation (1990:36). Dislocation arises precisely from the fact that power relations are uneven, but an important outcome of this process, and one which can be seen to redefine dislocation as a positive concept instead of the negative connotations it is perceived to have, is that structure is dislocated and "constitutively decentred" (1990:40).

The dislocation we are referring to is not one of a machine that has broken down because of the misadjustment of one of its components. We are dealing with a very specific dislocation: one that stems from the presence of antagonistic forces. Social dislocation is therefore coterminous with the

⁷ Of course, Delany does not have a monopoly on this. Other SF writers who have mined the same rich field include Ursula K Le Guin and Philip K Dick.

construction of power centres. But given that the possibility of resistance to that power means that the latter is not a total power, the vision of the social emerging from this description is that of a plurality of power centres, each with different capacity to irradiate and structure. (Laclau 1990:40)

What Laclau means is that dislocation fragments possibility and meaning, favouring spatialisation as opposed to hegemonic order. "The dislocated structure thus opens possibilities of multiple and indeterminate rearticulations for those freed from its coercive force and who are consequently outside it" (1990:43). Once again, Laclau refers to the 'outside', but as a position of strength from which to direct social determination, as opposed to interpreting the 'outside' in the sense of hermeneutic exclusion from social reality.⁸

Commenting on his view of the role of SF, Delany says it is a "literature of ideas" (1994a:71) that "dramatises notions of critical theory in much the same way that it dramatises notions from any hard or soft science" (1994a:71). Therefore, as a marginal literary activity, it "shatters the whole notion of a firm and fixed social centre, as well as of a coherent and socially centred subject" (1994a:71). This is akin to Laclau's theory of dislocation, and thus Delany can be seen as using SF to dislocate conventional ideas about society and structure. Structure is a key concept, especially if we take into account the "structuralist vision" (Laclau 1990:43) that "I am a product of structures; there is nothing in me with a separate substantiality from the discourses making me up; a total determinism governs my actions" (1990:43). This leads me to a more detailed discussion of structuralism itself as a literary theory, as this is an important part of Delany's fictional project.

My critical focus in this thesis is the shift in literary theory from structuralism towards the increasingly slippery slope of poststructuralism and postmodernism, concentrating on Derrida's critique of the main components of structuralism, such as the sign and structure, and its methodology, as represented specifically by semiology (Jefferson 1986:112). Delany himself, in a discussion of his *Nevèryon* series, explains how such a critical shift can be structured: the classical notion of the sign – that is, its

⁸ Delany's carefully-nurtured position as an 'outsider' in the closely-knit community of SF readers and writers gives him leeway to dissect the genre and its commonality. In other words, he uses SF's own exclusion from the greater body of mainstream literature to refract his own exclusion or difference in socio-political terms. Importantly, what Delany has achieved is to foreground these socio-political concerns in the very fabric of SF itself, thereby successfully opposing the contention that the genre is mainly narcissistic and playful. In other words, it may be divorced from reality in terms of its subject matter, but this is an articulation of dislocation that ultimately seeks to deconstruct society itself.

division into signifier and signified – stabilises a “conservative notion of social relations” (1989c:354).

For example, SF signifies a particular literary genre with strict formal interpretations of its scope and function, so that it is easy to declare what is SF and what is not. A more detailed view of the sign “shatter[s] it into sign consumption / transformation / production (or *semiosis* – more usually defined as ‘sign interpretation’), sign function, and sign vehicle ...” (Delany 1989c:354). Delany explains that semiosis “allows signs to evolve, generate new signs, critique themselves, and generally to change” (1989c:354). For example, SF is not nearly as simple a term as it appears at first, for what it actually excludes through its formal definition forces an active reinterpretation of the genre itself. This means seeing SF as a process rather as a product, with a view to outlining its literary evolution. By examining the extremely varied work of a practitioner of SF such as Delany, elements of this critical trajectory can be traced.

One of the main proponents of this deconstructive practice is, of course, Derrida himself, whose main focus is to point out the pitfalls of constructing any theoretical system, as the notion of a system automatically implies a hierarchy in which certain concepts are privileged over others, and others are simply taken as givens when, in truth, all are relational and interdependent. Instead of a concrete theoretical system, all there can possibly be is an associative tracery of influences, inferences, and references (Culler 1979:155-56). Structuralism supposes that language is the answer, with the very structure of language reflecting the basic structure of society – thus, understanding the one automatically implies knowledge of the other. But the solution contains the seeds of the exact same problems it is meant to resolve, namely “the relationship between event and structure, the empirical and the ideal, system and origin, and speech and writing” (Culler 1979:157). Delany comments as follows:

Language in its classical model begins as the grunt spilling out alongside gesture, the excess of indication, the supplement to ostension, the verbal signifier denoting reference. But eventually the grunt, the excess, the supplement recomplicates into meaning, a system so rich it reverses the hierarchy at precisely the point the grunt becomes a spillage, an excess, a supplement to emotion, need, desire ... In its recomplication it becomes a system able to create and to control meaning on its own, developing in the process its own spillage, excess, supplement – writing – which begins to

recomplicate all over again, again upsetting the power hierarchy (Delany 1989c:355-56)

The obvious corollary to this, states Delany, is that social power relations are “very much a language” (1989c:357).

They involve understood meanings, always more or less accepted, always more or less challenged, always in excess of bodily coercion ... that contour appropriate *or* inappropriate behaviour. (1989c:357)

As Derrida notes, “‘everyday language’ is not innocent or neutral” (1981:19). He uses the concept of logocentrism to describe “all forms of thought which base themselves on some external point of reference, such as the notion of truth” (Jefferson 1986:113). From Plato onwards, Western philosophy has always regarded language as being subservient to some external idea, referent, or intention. This flies in the face of the Saussurean notion that it is language itself that is primary, with meaning not preceding language in any way, but simply being an effect of language, or a byproduct. However, “the conceptual oppositions which structure Western philosophical thought” all imply the idea that content and medium exist independently of each other. The word ‘medium’ conveys the impression that language is an instrument or secondary vehicle for something primary and irreducible that “governs it from without” (Jefferson 1986:113).

Another term for Western logocentrism is metaphysics of presence, which underpins all our thinking, but also gives “rise to paradoxes that challenge its coherence and consistence, and therefore challenge the possibility of determining or defining being as presence” (Culler 1979:161). An example is two people speaking – we assume automatically that the meaning conveyed in the exchange was already implicit in the speakers’ minds, which is a hierarchical and logocentric assumption. Even our notion of reality is logocentric, because the building blocks of reality are “a series of present states” (Culler 1979:162). The concept of a tree, for example, exists because at some other time a person referred to it, and so on and so on. But this is the crux of the logocentric dilemma: if what we assume to be the very building blocks of reality are so interdependent on others, then how can we possibly lay claim to them as being constituent components? Culler comments:

An account of what is happening at a given instant requires references to other instants, which are not present. There is thus a crucial sense in which the non-present inhabits and is part of the present Anything that is supposedly present and given as such is dependent for its identity on differences and relations which can never be present. (1979:163)

This is the “paradox (or aporia) of structure and event” (Culler 1979:163). The assumption that a word’s meaning depends on that word having being communicated before infers that the very structure of language in terms of the rules that govern it result from communicative acts. But every event is predetermined and anchored by existing structures, which points to the impossibility of arriving at the originating event of the first structure. Thus signification is dependent on differences or contrasts, which, in turn, are themselves the products of events, creating a constantly shifting perspective or dialectic between the two. Derrida describes this shifting perspective as *différance*, about which he remarks: “I do not know if it signifies at all” (1981:8). *Différance* “is written and read, but cannot be heard” due to the introduction of the ‘a’. It is a noun predicated on the verb *différer*, and is the lynchpin of various concepts:

First, différence refers to the (active *and* passive) movement that consists in deferring by means of delay, delegation, reprieve, referral, detour, postponement ... *Second*, the movement of *différance*, as that which produces different things, that which differentiates, is the common root of all the oppositional concepts that mark our language ... *Third, différence* is also the production ... of these differences, of the diacritic that the linguistics generated by Saussure, and all the structural sciences modeled upon it, have recalled is the condition for any signification and any structure. (Derrida 1981:8-9)

Armed with *différance*, Derrida tackles the logocentrism of Saussure’s theory of language, a project he terms “an uprooting of the sign from its own soil” (1981:17). Saussure both denies and affirms logocentrism and the metaphysics of presence. On the one hand, his notion of language as a system of arbitrary signs, which are only distinguishable by their difference as relational units, flies in the face of logocentrism. On the other hand, Derrida highlights a distinct logocentric bent in Saussure in his view of writing as “a secondary, derivative status compared with speaking” (Culler 1979:166). Saussure proclaims:

... linguistics will constantly have to deal with the written language ... but it will always distinguish between the written text and what lies underneath; treating the former as being only the envelope or external mode of presentation of its true object, which is solely the spoken language. (1910)

Derrida focused on this aspect of Saussure because it is symptomatic of the Western attitude towards language, which perceives speech as being natural or direct communication, with writing as “an oblique representation of a representation” (Culler 1979:166). The physical marks that make up writing are inferior in two important aspects: they are removed from the thoughts or ideas that gave rise to them, and function in the absence of the speaker or hearer. The fact that writing can even be anonymous – that is, totally divorced from any author or speaker – further underlines Saussure’s impression of writing as a deformation or distortion of speech.

What is at stake here is an ideal model of communication, whereby the listener understands precisely, and instantly, the message or information conveyed by the speaker. Saussure warns, however, that this ideal mode of interaction can be “usurped” by the “tyranny of writing” – for example, pronunciation errors can “infect” or “corrupt” the “natural spoken forms” (Culler 1979:167). This admission adds a complex new dimension to the relationship between speech and writing. The traditional view is that meaning is made manifest by the spoken word in a clear one-to-one relationship between speaker and utterance. Derrida ultimately argues that language is “a play of differences, a proliferation of traces and repetitions that, under conditions that can be described but never exhaustively specified, give rise to effects of meaning” (Culler 1979:172).

The critique of logocentrism “is sustained by the very logocentrism which it seeks to breach” (Culler 1979:172), meaning that Derrida is arguing from within the boundaries of the system he is seeking to subvert, and thus cannot totally avoid being influenced by the prevailing system. This is also due to the simple fact that one cannot step outside language in order to criticise it. What is needed, then, is a new approach that introduces new concepts as well as using the old system to deconstruct itself, a process that Culler defines as a “double reading” (1979:172):

Deconstruction thus undertakes a double reading, describing the ways in which lines of argument in the texts it is analysing call their premises into question, and using the system of concepts within which a text works to

produce constructs, such as *différance* and *supplement*, which challenge the consistency of that system. (Culler 1979:172)

Culler comments further that Derrida's "deconstruction reversals are strategic interventions" (1979:178), meaning that he draws attention to the limits and inherent assumptions underpinning any system or concept. He focuses on terms that, in their "double functioning[,] reveal a problematic logic that exceeds and undermines the explicit of a text" (Culler 1979:178). The sign is defined traditionally as being a substitute for something. Saussure developed the concept further by breaking it down into signifier and signified, and stressing the arbitrary nature of signs. Though Saussure was careful to point out that these two components are like different sides of the same coin, and therefore inseparable, Derrida argues that a hierarchy is nevertheless implicit, for the very distinction between the two components raises the possibility "of an independent signified existing prior to its signifier, and therefore capable of being represented by more than one signifier" (Jefferson 1986:115).

The implication of this is that a signifier can be seen as a substitute for a signified. Derrida comments that the notion of the sign "carries within itself the necessity of privileging the phonic substance and of setting up linguistics as the 'pattern' for semiology" (1981:22-23). Therefore Derrida's notion of *différance* – which he is careful to stress is not a concept, but should rather be seen as a condition – is more flexible and adaptive than Saussure's principle of the differential. Derrida also highlights the problem of the "transcendental signified", which is "a concept simply present for thought, independent of a relationship to language" (1981:19). It exceeds the chains of signs, meaning that it is not bound to any signifier.

This is the moment when structuralism gives way to poststructuralism – as the former "divided the sign from the referent", so does the latter "distance the signifier from the signified", introducing the concept of play into structure (Marshall 1992:66). This is important because the Prague School definition of structure – that is, the prevailing or traditional meaning – presupposed hierarchical elements comprising a closed totality, with the parts being subordinate to the whole, and the form of the structure treated as an object in its own right, which dispenses with differential value (Jefferson 1986:115):

Similarly, being closed and self-contained, the structure implies a concentric form of organisation with the centre as the organising agent which

would then be exempt from the play of difference which, instead, it appears to control. (Jefferson 1986:115)

Derrida's notion of *différance* presupposes an open-ended chain of signification in which the individual elements cannot simply be reduced to objects, as this chain is both temporal and spatial (Jefferson 1986:115). For Derrida, language is a "field of substitutions", but without any centre to constrain such play, resulting in language becoming "a dynamic of supplementarity" (Marshall 1992:68). The traditional view of a direct relation between object and word presupposed some organising centre, namely truth or reality, maintaining such a closed system of meaning. But with Derrida, the sign is the centre – implying that, according to the logic of the supplement, "language functions in the space of absence".⁹ This loss of the centre, combined with the concept of play, marks the ascendancy of the postmodern moment:

If we think of this 'play', this loss of the centre, in a spirit of mourning for the lost dream of truth and absolutes, then we are not thinking within the postmodern moment. Within the postmodern moment 'play' remarks a "joyous affirmation": it suggests a world not based on a closing down of meaning through a false acquiescence of power, but rather on an opening up toward the privileging of active interpretation. (Marshall 1992:69-70)

This complex and far-reaching debate about the nature of language suffuses Delany's own writings in, and about, SF, into which he injects the poststructuralist concept of 'play' to open up the genre to the possibilities of "the privileging of active interpretation". Delany comments that the suggestion that "meanings could come apart from words" (1994a:22) originates as far back as the Greek Stoics, who were "generally presumed to be the earliest Western thinkers to have described the sign as consisting of a perceptible *signans* and an intelligible *signatum* – i.e., a signifier and a signified" (1994a:57). What Delany is suggesting is that the debate about words and their meanings is as old as Western thinking itself, underpinning its own continuing evolution and development. The 'modern' view about the meanings of words is that "meanings just *aren't* hard-edged and delimitable" (1994a:22), with Derrida "one of the new thinkers to make it disturbingly clear that the most fixed and irrefutable-

⁹ As Culler points out: "The marginal in its very marginality turns out to characterise the central object of discussion" (1979:171).

seeming meaning is finally a more or less undetermined play of undecidables” (1994a:22-23).

Delany comments that what interests him about words is how they are combined to form sentences, and the rules that govern these combinations and permutations. Sentences are constructed on the basis of rigid ‘codes’, resulting in “various combinations and embeddings and tortuosities” (1994a:23). This leads to the even more interesting structuralist question: what, in turn, constitutes these ‘codes’ themselves?

Knowing the simplest meaning of a word is a matter of knowing a code. Knowing printed letters – written characters – stand for language and are there to convey it is, itself, only a certain codic convention. “Word” (or, indeed, “sentence” or “paragraph”) is only the codic term for the complex of codic conventions by which we recognise, respond to, understand, and act on whatever causes us to recognise, respond, understand, and act in such a way that, among those recognitions and responses and understandings, is the possible response: “word” (or, indeed, “sentence” or “paragraph”). (1994a:23)¹⁰

The obvious corollary to this structuralist view is that the world is comprised of “nothing *but* codes, codic systems and complexes, and the codic terms used to designate one part of one system, complex, or another” (1994a:23). This is yet another articulation of Laclau’s ‘structuralist vision’ of social reality being comprised of nothing more – or less – than a dialectic of intersecting social dialogues. But how far can one push the analogy before it begins to fall apart and become nonsensical – or even dangerous to the system itself it is purportedly dissecting? Delany warns that “the sentential, codic – or semiotic – view is dangerous because questions that, at least initially, seem inimical to the system *do* get asked” (1994a:23-24).

Sense-bound distinctions such as inside and outside become hugely questionable. Value-bound metaphors such as higher and lower stand revealed as arbitrary. And the physically inspired quality of identity becomes a highly rigid mentalistic ascription in a system that can clearly accommodate more flexibility. (Delany 1994a:24)

How does one deal with this situation without becoming irrational or even mad? Delany responds that one must always bear in mind that the way that social

¹⁰ One can clearly discern the influence of Derrida on Delany in this convoluted, playful, yet apparently serious paragraph, which reads like ‘Derrida Lite’ ...

reality is coded is “terribly complex, recursive, self-critical, and self-revising” (1994a:24), for therefore, by definition, it is overdetermined, and “the overdetermination of the codic system is the most forceful suggestion that the universe, from which the system is made and to which (we assume) it is a response, is itself overdetermined – which is to say: It operates by laws” (1994a:24). It seems perverse to conclude that the free play governing social structure is, in fact, an expression of immutable laws, as this returns one to the starting point of debating the separation between meanings and words. But such circularity is, indeed, a supreme expression of poststructuralist ‘play’, where every end is its own beginning, and every signified is also a signifier.

Bearing in mind the intricate metaphysical and philosophical debate behind the notion of codic systems or laws – which underpins the very meaning of language, and the language of meaning itself – Delany’s critical project has been to determine the codic systems or laws of SF itself and, in so doing, manipulate them to reveal their arbitrariness and constructed nature – which, in turn, will reveal these codic systems or laws all the more starkly due to their overdetermined or redundant nature. David N. Samuelson notes that, “whatever their differences, commercial writers, fan critics, and academics have hailed Delany as a major theorist of the contours and exposition of [SF]” (1994:21).

Delany has been able to achieve this status by making up the rules, and defending or recasting them, as he goes along, “while academic scholars often struggle under a load of knowledge and techniques more appropriate to defending values of the literary canon” (Samuelson 1994:21). This is not to suggest that Delany’s preconceptions are unacademic – rather, he brings to bear on SF the same critical values applied to the so-called ‘literary canon’, in order to cast a light of scrutiny to reflect on, and illuminate, each other’s differences in terms of the codic systems that underpin both. Samuelson comments that Delany’s critical writings are “a collage of theory, invention, and memoir” (1994:23), thereby conflating the very nature of ‘critical writing’ itself. He adds that these are “atypical for [SF] in the nature and range of material he has absorbed, including personal experience” (1994:23):

... an observant child of the “black bourgeoisie” growing up in Harlem in the Forties and Fifties. Attending schools for the gifted across town, he saw at first hand disparities of class and caste distinguished by economics, skin colour,

and subculture. Homosexual in a sexually repressed era and married at age 19 to a precocious poet, he could hardly escape noticing arbitrary gender distinctions, from the opprobrium heaped on “perverts” to the heterosexual economy of scarcity, from male dominance in job rewards and assignments to the different cuts of men’s and women’s jeans. (Samuelson 1994:23)

For Delany, the challenge was how to articulate these defining life experiences in the fictional, and fantastical, realm of SF. But first one has to question why Delany gravitated towards SF at all, a genre whose relationship to reality can best be described as arbitrary.¹¹ Samuelson proposes that Delany “was attracted to SF largely by its potential for alternatives” (1994:23). In other words, it opposes reality by being totally different or removed from it in some fundamental context, implying that reality as we know it is not the only template upon which to construct social relations. Therefore SF’s ‘oppositional’ character can be seen as rich dialectical ground to nurture alternative theories of social construction and interaction. Samuelson notes that Delany “began writing it highly conscious of theoretical concerns and their practical applications to the written word, and very aware that he was writing and living on the margin of reputability” (1994:23). This was due, in part, to an eclectic upbringing that saw him exposed to African-American writers at school, to classical and modern texts at home, and to SF when in summer camp (Samuelson 1994:23).

In addition, dyslexia meant that Delany “came early to a grasp of conventions and complexity” (1994:23) through the sheer effort of having to pay close attention to every single letter. Samuelson also speculates that Delany is an “acute analyst” of social roles and behaviours due to having to deal with the conflict generated by his sexuality in opposition to social norms and conventions (1994:23). Given this particular background, it was perhaps inevitable that Delany became exposed to such theorists as Derrida and Michel Foucault, with the former’s emphasis on ‘free play’ and ‘decentring’, and the latter’s analyses of sex and power relations. However, while Delany’s prodigious intellect obviously played a constitutive role in this, it must be noted that not every homosexual is destined to become a poststructuralist academic.

The first important aspect to note about Delany’s critical project is how he cannot hope to escape genre definitions or expectations. Samuelson explains how

¹¹ Even this assertion is problematic, for as Delany says: “I’ve never *proclaimed* my work SF, proudly or humbly. I assume most of my published fiction is SF – and I assume most of my readers feel it is, too. But that’s like a poet assuming she writes poems, or a playwright assuming he writes plays” (1994a:27).

these expectations are generated automatically almost as a byproduct of Delany's critical intentions:

As a theorist, Delany's first concern is to raise audience consciousness of the act of reading, which initiates a dialogue between readers and writers (themselves first and foremost readers). Central to reading is the interplay between the written text and reader expectations, about life as well as literature. Reinforced expectations "sediment out", that is, enough material and practice become distinct from those in other areas of discourse to establish a separate identity, typically called a "genre", but uniting reading and rhetorical practices as well as texts ... (Samuelson 1994:23-24)

This has led Delany to define his own particular 'brand' of SF, as it were, as 'paraliterature' (1994a:21), emphasising its marginal status within the context of a marginal genre.¹² By conflating his life with his fictional enterprise, Delany is attempting to extend the boundaries of SF. In this vein, Samuelson comments that "his ultimate goal as a writer may be to bring about a recognition of the power of language to decentre the role of conventions in life as well as in fiction" (1994:24).¹³ Therefore it is significant that Delany's critical project has always stressed interplay between reader and text, suggesting that the boundary between the two is permeable.

By 1972, Delany began to talk about 'reader protocols', referred to later as 'codes' or 'conventions', which are "elements of reader expectation immediately perceived by those attuned to a specific 'discourse'" (Samuelson 1994:24). In other words, reader protocols are those elements that lead a reader to define a particular text as being SF, and how those expectations shape his or her textual perceptions. Genre conventions – that is, elements of style, subject matter, tropes, and other literary devices or techniques – that define a particular genre such as SF have to be 'learnt' in the sense that frequent exposure will familiarise a reader with them.

¹² Samuelson comments: "Delany seems to seek an ideal (para-)literature in which considerations of race and sexual preference are inclusive rather than exclusive, and in which science and technology take unexpected turns" (1994:34). A startling example of the latter is Bron Helstrom's sex change in *Triton* (1976). Delany comments: "Literature is a marginal, strategic, and subversive activity at play in the social margins of politics, industry, advertising, and the media, and the minor literatures are, of course, on the margin of the margin [which] recalls Derrida's "the signifier of the signifier" as the model for all signification" (1994a:212).

¹³ This conflation of fiction and reality is clearly evident in such a later non-SF work as *The Mad Man*, where, despite clear autobiographical elements, Delany states in a Disclaimer: "No character, major or minor, is intended to represent any actual person, living or dead. (Correspondences are not only coincidental but preposterous.)" (1994b:xiii). Perhaps what Delany is trying to do here is force the reader to re-evaluate his or her own perceptions about fiction versus reality. Whatever the case, a neat causal link cannot be inferred. Disruption or dislocation is always the path that Delany suggests his readers must follow in order to be illuminated, and, in turn, illuminate the text themselves through their own experiences and perceptions.

This not only refers to neologisms or unknown words or phrases; perfectly ordinary words or phrases can assume completely different meanings or intentions in an SF context. This implies that the repertoire of literary effects and meanings available to SF is far wider than conventional literature, and also that SF as a genre is more flexible and adaptable. Samuelson says that SF's "wider verbal latitude, including and supplementing meanings of here and now, offers more scope than mundane realism on the level of style" (1994:25). Another implication is that, despite the fact that SF is mainly billed as the genre of the future, it maintains an "outward discourse" with the world it creates, so that reader and author become complicit in the act of creation, giving the SF context a tangible basis in the here and now. This subverts the notion that literature is "a privileged mode of writing apart from life" (Samuelson 1994:34).

Delany has adopted this as a sort of mantra or credo underlining every aspect of his existence, identifying with the oppressed, marginal, and deviant in both his life and his writing, to the extent that he has often resided in rundown urban neighbourhoods (Samuelson 1994:35).¹⁴ The reason for this is "that such settings expose one to changes facing the larger society" (1994:35), but Samuelson argues that underlying this too-rational explanation is the fact that Delany "seems to crave a degree of danger in his life" (1994:35). This is the danger of living on the edge of the marginal, of inhabiting the dark corners and interstices of the social fabric.

His memoirs and some of his more overtly autobiographical fiction suggest that he has risked both life and limb in promiscuous sexual behaviour. He has also befriended many marginal individuals, among them petty criminals and unappreciated artists. Having voluntarily undergone therapy in a mental hospital in 1964 to deal with stress resulting from the sexual, racial, and professional anomalies in his life, he is sensitive to both the mentally ill and the socially deviant. Seeing these categories as socially (not medically) determined, virtually as a gentrification of human beings, he accepts criminals as well as artists, sadists as well as homosexuals. (Samuelson 1994:35)

¹⁴ Carey Goldberg writes tactfully of Delany's quarters in New York: "It is a rather rundown apartment where he ruminates, one in urgent need of a paint job" (1999). In total contrast to the usual academic fare churned out about Delany, Goldberg's feature story – about a day in the life of the Famous Writer – is amusing and revealing. It begins: "Samuel R. Delany thumps down the rickety-rackety stairs of his fifth-floor walk-up and drops off his garbage on the curb like anybody else. He buys tickets at the Port Authority. He stops for an afternoon pick-me-up at a bar nearby, a New York guy doing everyday things. But there is a gleam in his eye from another galaxy" (1999).

This means that Delany has always criticised “establishment rules and attitudes” (1994:35) by active example as opposed to empty rhetoric. It is something of a paradox that Delany’s dabbling in deviancy has added to his glamour as a colourful figure on the periphery of a marginal genre. Another paradox is that, “embodying the positive message of expanding alternatives and opportunities, his work speaks the language of the establishment at the same time as he helps to destroy the limiting values that uphold it” (Samuelson 1994:35). This is because of the nature of Delany’s fundamental message, namely that “we must understand codes and conventions in order to transcend them” (Samuelson 1994:35). Samuelson explains how these ‘protocols’ function:

The protocols of language mirror those of society and genre. Their arbitrary nature is the source of their strength, their hold on our imaginations, since we memorise and internalise them, rather than deriving them from logic and experiment. We must see the world through arbitrary categories before viewing categories critically; without such frameworks, we see nothing critically. (Samuelson 1994:35)

Delany comments that “orthodox and radical psychiatry or the Moral Majority or feminist critics against pornography” are “signs of potential terrorism” as they interiorise the ‘law’ through the medium of sex (1989c:356). (Law can be seen as referring to conventional morality). Like Foucault, Delany sees social relations as power relations, but with a particular gender bias that entrenches patriarchal society.

The material power of the present father is the material power of any coercive aggressive individual, male or female, armed or unarmed. But it is only the power to coerce in excess of immediate bodily force – the power of the ‘absent father’ – that constitutes authority in our patriarchal culture as a day-to-day social reality ... as long as power, whether it goes with or against the law, is named male, the law will itself *be* male (Delany 1989c:357)

Delany argues that this is the case because “language is first and foremost a *stabiliser* of behaviour” (1989c:360), meaning that it conditions responses and attitudes for both groups and individuals. Its role as a tool of communication and intellectual analysis is secondary to its function as a moderator or regulator of social behaviour. Although such a stabilising system is oppressive in that it fixes meaning, Delany notes that it also performs a vital and necessary function in generating meaning itself:

Given the tasks we humans find, fixate on, and imagine, again and again our responses must achieve a variety, complexity, and accuracy surpassing those of other species by enormous factors. If there were not an extensive stabilising system, that variety, complexity, and accuracy could never be achieved. (Delany 1989c:361)

Delany argues that, “among the most fundamental conceptual alignments of patriarchal thought, and one of the most common in the range of human cultures”, is “to make the complex, multiple, and unequal alignment penis / outside / something (presence / desire) on the one hand and vagina / inside / nothing (absence) on the other” (1989c:362). Delany explains that the phallus is the “Symbolic unit that conjoins the notions of masculinity, greater relative size, hardness, and power”, while ignoring the equally symbolic “vulnerability of the male genitalia during erection”, or indeed in a flaccid state (1989c:363). The point of this is that patriarchal society has a masculine bias in the language through which it is defined and determined, a bias that “stabilises responses and patterns of response” (1989c:363).

Language is a stabiliser among our responses to the world and to our problems in it. When the stabilising system is so powerful and important as to make our responses as we recognise them, for all practical purposes (whether they are good responses or bad ones), possible, it is tempting to view that the stabilising system itself as causative of the responses if the responses are judged good, and causative of the problems themselves if the responses are judged bad ... (Delany 1989c:364)

What Delany is saying here is that the stabilising system is as much the answer to the problem as it is the original cause thereof. If behaviour is stabilised by language, then “to make real changes in patriarchal society and culture will require complex, intricate, and accurate behaviour” (1989c:364). Delany argues that the Bible itself, the text underpinning the socio-political reality of Christianity as a stabilised form of normative behaviour, teaches that Adam “alone had the right to name – that is, he had the triple right, first, to divide up the world into the semantic units most useful to him, second, to organise those units into the fictions that would stabilise what was most useful to him to have stable, and, third, to exclude from language whatever was most convenient for him to leave unspoken” (1989c:366-67). Delany argues that the path towards a world where “freedom of social determination” is a given for both sexes can only be stabilised itself if women “seize this triple right to name, seize it violently and hold to it tenaciously” (1989c:367). They must do so in

order to tell new tales, in order to “stabilise reactions in both men and women at a fine enough precision to bring about the desired revolution in patriarchal society and culture” (1989c:367).

... at this point the historical battle to name the law and to effect its constitution within an always-to-be-created society and culture – already a whit less patriarchal for sustaining the conflict even the length of time it takes to name it – has always-already begun. (Delany 1989c:367)

It is this ‘always-to-be-created’ future society of true social determination that is the Holy Grail of Delany’s fictions. It is this yet-to-begin and already-vanquished mythical war to stabilise new forms of behaviour that will shatter the shackles of oppression and difference that he is wearily slogging away at, is awaiting eagerly to begin, and has long-since vanquished.

Chapter One

Words of Wonder

In this chapter, I will begin to examine the potential link between SF and literary theory, with especial reference to structuralism, by means of a close reading of *Babel-17* (Delany 1966) and *They Fly at Çiron* (Delany 1993), and thereby attempt to illuminate what I perceive of as Delany's articulation of the mutual compatibility between the two. By applying structuralist theory as a mode of reading to these two novels, I will attempt to explicate how Delany is aware of, and uses, literary theory as part of his science fictional strategy. Several points need to be spelled out from the outset: it must be noted that I am not attempting to argue that these are two 'structuralist' novels; that the terms 'structuralism' and 'SF' themselves are multivalent and ambiguous; and that Delany's own critical trajectory cannot be isolated to a convenient point of commencement, and traced linearly to some definitive conclusion in the later novels.

What I am attempting to do in this chapter is examine the functioning of literary theory in relation to SF. Of the two novels I have selected, the former uses the conventions of space opera to weave a dense theoretical web about "speculative linguistics" (Samuelson 1994:21), while the latter, written 30 years later, is a mythical fantasy that engages dialectically with the basic structuralist tenets expressed in *Babel-17*. I believe that *They Fly at Çiron* also gives an interesting glimpse into what Delany thinks constitutes SF itself, which becomes particularly relevant when the latter novel is examined against the backdrop of *Babel-17*. First of all, I need to address the question of terminology and definitions. This chapter is merely a tentative embarkation by placing Delany's second published SF work under the theoretical spotlight, and examining its contrast and complementarity with one of his later works. I am not attempting any formal closure as to Delany's definition of SF (a detailed discussion of the complexity of this issue will be presented in Chapter Four, where the focus will fall on poststructuralism and postmodernism, which are only touched upon in passing in this initial foray).

Of course, my own definition of SF which I apply in this chapter cannot, by definition, be neutral.¹ Whereas Clute notes that early definitions focused on "the

¹ Edward James offers valuable insight into the problem of defining SF: "Attempts at definition usually seem to imply a belief in a Platonic idea of 'science fiction', rather than a bundle of perceptions about what constitutes sf [*sic*] – a bundle whose contents are constantly changing, from decade to decade, from critic to critic, and from country to country. Attempts at definition, in other words, frequently appear to be laying down rules about what sf *ought* to be like, rather than offering some kind of all-embracing description of the great range and wide variety of texts which have been, and are, recognised as making up the body of sf. Definitions are thus frequently closely linked to the desire of critics to

presence of 'science', or at least scientific method, as a necessary part of the fiction" (1993:312), Delany approaches the problem from a more theoretical viewpoint in *Triton* (1976), and puts forward the idea that SF is a 'way of reading':

Science fiction is science fiction because various bits of technological discourse ... – that is to say, the science – are used to redeem various other sentences from the merely metaphorical, or even the meaningless, for denotative description/presentation of incident. ... embedded in the textus of anyone who can read the sentence properly, are those emblems by which they could recognise such discourse were it manifested to them (Delany 1976:336)

Delany notes that textus is derived from the Latin term for 'web', a convenient metaphor to apply to the polymorphous nature of the term 'SF', with its serpentine interpenetration and interrelation.

All the uses of the word 'web', 'weave', 'net', 'matrix' and more ... become entrance points into a textus, which is ordered from all language and language-functions, and upon which the text itself is embedded. (Delany 1976:333)

This focus on language brings me to the definition of structuralism, in turn, which is as contested a term as SF itself. Chris Baldick argues that structuralism

analyses cultural phenomena according to principles derived from linguistics, emphasising the systematic interrelationship among the elements of any human activity, and thus the abstract codes and conventions governing the social production of meanings. (1990:213)

Delany's interest in structuralism is closely related to his interest in SF, for the latter is also governed by 'abstract codes and conventions' to produce meaning. These include such tropes as spaceships, galactic empires, aliens, and interstellar conflict – all elements of a generic sub-division known as space opera, to which *Babel-17* belongs.² And yet, as I will show, Delany manipulates SF signifieds beyond their traditional meaning to engage in a dialectic about the nature of language and reality. Just as SF is constructed of tropes and conventions, so is reality constructed by mutual

defend their interests in the face of hostile attacks by emphasising one element of sf at the expense of others" (1994:1). Brian Aldiss makes a similar point when he declares that "there is no such entity as science fiction. We have only the work of many men and women which, for convenience, we can group together under the label 'science fiction'" (1986:23).

² John Clute explains the origins of the term: "When radio was the principal medium of home entertainment in the USA, daytime serials intended for housewives were often sponsored by soap-powder companies; the series were thus dubbed 'soap operas'. The name was soon generalised to refer to any corny domestic drama ... the pattern was extended into sf [*sic*] terminology by Wilson Tucker in 1941, who proposed 'space opera' as the appropriate term for the 'hacky, grinding, stinking, outworn, spaceship yarn'" (1993:1138).

consensus on the part of its members, according to one sociological viewpoint. This gives *Babel-17* a peculiar doubling effect: by examining a fictional reality imagined by the author, Delany is simultaneously commenting on the processes by which 'normal' reality is maintained and mediated.

Babel-17, Delany's second published novel, won the Nebula Award for best SF novel of 1966, having introduced "something new in the genre" in the form of "a far greater emphasis on language" (Aldiss 1986:368). Aldiss adds that Delany's true value lies in "his intelligent approach to the actual business of writing", and for his recognition and exploitation of "the sheer potentiality" of the genre (1986:368). Aldiss's statement can be read as implying that literary theory can be legitimately applied to SF. This seems simplistic, but the implications are profound, for it intimates a level of complexity and sophistication not ordinarily afforded to the genre due to its firmly-perceived locus in popular culture.

Are Delany's overt concerns with language and contemporary literary theory unfamiliar or strange thematic material for SF and fantasy? Has Delany genuinely broken new ground, or merely expressed ideas implicit in SF all along? My initial focus on *Babel-17* will be to show that dealing with such thematic material SF is far from odd, but rather enriching in the sense that it expands the signifiatory scope of the genre. The novelty or innovation of Delany's approach within the boundaries of the genre itself will be assessed in later chapters.

George Slusser's comment that, "both in theory and practice, Delany's 'speculative fiction' is structuralist" (1977:3), is a perceptive, albeit dated, example of the attempt to analyse Delany's early conceptual or theoretical position – as well as to unify or clarify that position, a task complicated by such books as the critical-essay collection *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw: Notes on the Language of Science Fiction* (1977), where Delany acknowledges his own contradictions and revisions. This is an important element of his theoretical forays, which I think have the side-effect of inculcating debate about SF and its theoretical underpinnings; it also defends against the dogmatic defense of a single mode of inquiry, which can limit the richness of Delany's project.

Damien Broderick comments about Delany that "one can trace through his essays a critical trajectory launched from a distrust of the content/form antithesis and peaking in an idiosyncratic blend of semiotics, Marxism, psychoanalysis and deconstruction" (1995:65). This multifaceted appraisal is in marked contrast to Slusser's cautious assessment of 1977, with Broderick's more confident approach acknowledging that one cannot impose a unidirectional focus on Delany's critical trajectory. By examining *Babel-17* and *They Fly at Çiron*, I will attempt to focus on

Delany's engagement with structuralism as a strand of the theoretical trajectory he has embarked upon in his career.

An example of Delany's intellectual engagement with SF is naming the spaceship of character Rydra Wong in *Babel-17 the Rimbaud*. Wong says "the name was Muels' idea (1966:46) – a reference to another character, Muels Aranlyde (an anagram of the real author's name), who is the fictitious author of the in-text book *Empire Star* (which Delany later used as a real title). This began a long tradition of Delany featuring as a character in his own fiction, which has continued up to *The Mad Man* (1994).³ Delany writes of the 'luminosity' of a particular writer's vision, and "the construction of these violent nets of wonder called sp[e]culative fiction" (1977:46), as being akin to poetry.⁴

The vision (sense of wonder, if you will) that [SF] tries for seems to me very close to the vision of poetry, particularly poetry as it concerned the nineteenth century Symbolists. No matter how disciplined its creation, to move into the 'unreal' world demands a brush with mysticism. (Delany 1977:46)

Delany compares the notion of a 'sense of wonder' associated with SF to Rimbaud's theory "of the systematic derangement of the senses to achieve the unknown" (1977:47). This is a single idea in *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw*, and illustrates the extent of the academic vistas that Delany believes SF is privy to through its complexity and richness as a legitimate literary genre. But Delany's interest in Rimbaud is not a mere spark – later, in *The Motion of Light in Water* (1990), this early idea is reflected in his interest in Roland Barthes and the notion of an 'erotics' of reading characterised by *jouissance*, or the 'pleasure' of the text (Delany 1994a:2). These two examples demonstrate Delany's eclectic interest in literary theory, which problematises any attempt at articulating a unified theoretical position, as Slusser bravely attempted.

Rimbaud has an added significance, as in Jebel Tarik's ironic comment to Rydra that "'Here on the Rim we are seldom visited by a Bard'" (1966:97). This is a somewhat laboured pun, but the message is clear: SF is a 'fun' genre in the sense that it can lend itself to intellectual 'games'. It is Delany's interest in applying literary theory to what is conventionally considered a marginal genre, or in Delany's

³ Commenting on Delany's early work, Brian Aldiss states that "Delany himself was there behind his mask ... a blend of Jean Genet and Cordwainer Smith, part cynical literateur, part wide-eyed fan" (1986:367).

⁴ Delany's use of 'speculative fiction' instead of the more traditional SF in this seminal critical work indicates the scope of his ambitious theoretical undertakings in the genre. Brian Aldiss states that the term refers to the borderland or middleground "between science fiction and fantasy" (1986:267). It also owes a debt to Robert Scholes's explication of 'structural fabulation' in his 1975 book of the same title (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press).

terminology a form of ‘paraliterature’, that has contributed to his marginalisation. (An interesting question is whether this is ironic or not, or simply a reflection of the extent to which Delany courts marginalisation.) He is working from a boundary or interstitial zone where the accepted conventions of SF are malleable, and can be deconstructed to reveal their innermost workings. As I shall show in this chapter, Delany crosses and recrosses the boundary between SF and literary theory with an insidious slippage that blurs sight of the boundary itself, to create an absence or gap in which meaning can proliferate.

Mario Pei comments in the epigraph to *Babel-17* that “‘Nowhere is civilisation so perfectly mirrored as in speech. If our knowledge of speech, or the speech itself, is not yet perfect, neither is civilisation’” (Delany 1966:2). At the beginning of *They Fly at Çiron*, the narrator comments that history itself fails “when the memory of a village is no older than the four or five generations it takes a grave-scroll record to rot” (1993:13). The point is that both novels are about different and opposing civilisations, and the attempts made by both sides – both inadvertently and actively – to comprehend and come to terms with each other. In *Babel-17* the focus is on language, while *They Fly at Çiron* raises the issue of writing and its relation to speech – both language and writing are defining characteristics of society, and perpetuate and enrich its common history.

Theorists from Plato to Ferdinand de Saussure have grappled with the vexing question of what is the true measure of civilisation: speech or writing (Culler 1979:167). In *Phaedrus*, Plato describes writing as “a bastardised form of communication” (Culler 1979:167), while Saussure relegates writing to “a secondary, derivative status as compared with speaking” (Culler 1979:166). Derrida argues that “treating writing as a parasitic and imperfect representation of speech” is a means of “repressing or setting aside certain features of language, or certain aspects of its functioning” (Culler 1979:167), a phenomenon he terms ‘phonocentrism’. The physical marks that constitute writing are removed from the thought that led to their production, which introduces the possibility of misrepresentation or distortion between speech and writing – the former being the pure, untrammelled state defiled by the intrusion of the latter. Jefferson writes that:

Any view which gives speech precedence over writing must be basing its preference on this sort of hierarchical model, which implicitly places ideas in a commanding position at the top, and writing as a degraded form of representation at the bottom. A truly Saussurean approach would give speech and writing equal status, since it regards language as a system of differences, and not as a collection of terms for conveying information existing independently of it. (1986:113)

Derrida illustrates the idea that writing does not copy speech by coining the term *différance* as a subtle variation of the usual French *difference*, a distinction only apparent in written form, and which does not correspond in any way to the spoken form, but although “this a is written or read, but cannot be heard ... this alteration, this graphic and grammatical aggression, implies an irreducible reference to the mute intervention of a written sign” (1981:8). The link between writing and identity is expressed in *Tales of Nevèrÿon* (1979) when Old Venn remarks that writing was invented to control slaves: “‘If you can write down a woman’s or man’s name ... you can manoeuvre your own dealings with them in ways that will soon control them’” (Delany 1979:104). Thus writing is also inextricably linked with social identity – and if thought or can be controlled or mediated through writing, then so can identity be regulated or determined. Thus a model of communication becomes a medium of social interaction:

If distance, absence, misunderstanding, insincerity are features of writing, then by distinguishing writing from speech one can construct a model of communication which takes as the norm an ideal associated with speech – where the listener is thought to be able in principle to grasp precisely what the speaker has in mind. (Culler 1979:167)

In *Babel-17*, Delany speculates on what may constitute such an ideal norm by ‘inventing’ a perfect language that conflates the speech/writing debate by being both pictographic and information-dense to a point of optimal compactness. Delany addresses the identity question in a startlingly controversial way by positing that the very nature of such a language would render a native speaker incapable of grasping or even articulating the concept of ‘I’ or the self. Terry Eagleton remarks that structuralism

is a symptom of the fact that language, with its problems, mysteries and implications, has become both paradigm and obsession for twentieth-century intellectual life. (1983:97)

According to Culler this is because:

Language is no longer the simple, transparent medium of thought it was once accepted as being. We prefer now to equate language with thought, and instead of looking through it, at reality, in an attempt to understand how we first of all acquire it and then use it. (Culler 1979:12)

This refers back to Mario Pei’s ambiguous contention that speech mirrors civilisation, for a mirror image is a reversal – and what then is reflection, and what is reality? Attempting to define the term ‘reality’ is to slip into a quagmire of signifiers.

Berger and Luckmann state that, from a sociological viewpoint, reality is “a kind of collective fiction, constructed and sustained by the processes of socialisation, institutionalisation, and everyday social interaction, especially through the medium of language” (McHale 1987:37).

The social reality of *Babel-17* is underpinned further by the religious connotations of Delany’s choice of title, in that Christianity is predicated upon the assumption that in the beginning was the Word. It is significant that Delany chooses a Biblical signifier in naming his perfect language, for the story of Babel begins with the whole earth united in a single language – which implies a perfect, harmonious civilisation. The people then decide to build a tower “whose top may reach unto heaven”, as well as choosing a name for themselves, “lest [they] be scattered abroad upon the face of the whole earth” (Scofield 1917:19). Thus language can be seen as the template upon which civilisation is built, and a controllable tool by which greater heights can be aspired to. But the story of Babel ends in tragedy:⁵

And the Lord came down to see the city and the tower, which the children of men builded.

And the lord said, Behold, the people is one, and they have all one language; and this they begin to do: and now nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do.

Go to, let us go down, and there confound their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech.

So the Lord scattered them abroad from thence upon the face of all the earth: and they left off to build the city.

Therefore is the name of it called Babel ... (1917:19)

Mario Pei comments that civilisation cannot be perfected unless its language is also perfected, and, in a sense, SF can be seen as an attempt to provide a perfect image of civilisation through the power of imagination (but mediated through the inadequacies of language). Of course, this is merely one view of the sociological import of SF, as it is not to say that everyone perceives the relevance or even significance of the genre in this fashion. Delany cautions that “[SF] is not about the future; it uses the future as a narrative convention to present significant distortions upon the present” (1984:47).⁶ He adds that: “A 60 000 word novel is one picture corrected 59 999 times” (1977:37). Thus the signifier ‘Babel-17’ is both title and

⁵ The question is why? Union in language implies perfect understanding, which then bestows unlimited collective power. Of course, the Old Testament God was too jealous to countenance this.

⁶ Ursula K Le Guin, a fellow SF writer much admired by and commented upon by Delany, expresses a similar sentiment when she states that “science fiction is not predictive; it is descriptive”. Le Guin adds that “prediction is the business of prophets, clairvoyants and futurologists. It is not the business of novelists. A novelist’s business is lying” (1989:151).

subject matter – endlessly modified and corrected, and even contradicted, when at the end *Babel-18* is given concrete form. Delany explains further:

... practically any text, if read carefully enough, generates both denotations and connotations that contradict each other, that subvert each other, that interfere with each other in such a way that the very concept of ‘knowing what the text means’ begins to fall apart ... (1984:48–49)

Delany’s choice of space opera as subject matter for his SF novel is as significant as the title. Perhaps the defining characteristic of space opera is war. It allows a writer to place characters in heroic situations, and to introduce a panoply of mysterious alien civilisations, artifacts and technobabble. Delany subverts the generic protocols of space opera by immediately opening *Babel-17* with an uncompromisingly gritty depiction of an anonymous port city caught in the stranglehold of a series of protracted interstellar embargoes played out against the larger backdrop of what is simply termed the ‘Invasion’.

... these people have lived for two decades under the Invasion. They’ve starved during the embargoes, broken windows, looted, run screaming before firehoses, torn flesh from a corpse’s arm with decalcified teeth. (Delany 1966:6)

By introducing a military-type character in a pensive and philosophical mood, Delany both dislocates the traditional action hero associated with space opera, and gives himself a vehicle to voice some of the deeper concerns to be addressed by the novel. General Forester’s ironic speculation on “Who is this animal man?” (1966:6) reflects the contradictory notion that the Invasion has produced “Panics, riots, burnings, twice cannibalism –” (1966:6), as well as inculcating patriotism and an obsession with social trivia as a means of societal defense and denial.

Forester is concerned that it is impossible to begin to know the masses on any level approaching individual intimacy, which perhaps also intimates the writer’s concern at conveying fully-rounded characters on the written page. From a structuralist perspective, the introduction of the Butcher raises the concern that studying language as a system to which individuals are subordinate actually negates the concept of individuality, as illustrated by the fact that the Butcher’s language has no word for ‘I’; thus it has no concept of individuality.

Walter Meyers points out that a significant criticism of Delany’s treatment of language in *Babel-17* is that he disregards the point that “any Whorfian linguistic influence would work on the mass of people, not on individuals” (1980:181). Thus it is unclear how *Babel-17* would function at a societal level, as the only example of its

functioning is provided by an individual – but, paradoxically, the language itself negates the concept of individuality.⁷

Space opera is also characterised by exotic aliens, and perhaps as a play upon this convention, Delany introduces a female Asian as central protagonist, who is “the most famous poet in five explored galaxies” and the voice of her age (1966:7, 18).⁸ It is ironic that a bureaucratic and literal-minded institution such as the military commandeers the services of a free-thinking and unpredictable poet to help decipher a cryptographic puzzle, but this is a subtle indication of Delany’s high regard for poetry and writing in general as a technical discipline. Wong explains that poetry involves absorbing the jumbled thoughts and clumsy feelings of people, burnishing this raw material, and welding the gleaming end product to a rhythmic frame (1966:18).

Delany uses the initial meeting between the protagonists to comment on the intricacies of communication between two people. Forester is clearly smitten with Wong, but berates himself for failing to communicate his true feelings to her. Indeed, it is revealed that Wong had deduced Forester’s thoughts of his failure to communicate through a complex, almost intuitive form of body language/muscle reading that is her own peculiar gift – a supplement to communication that goes beyond language itself in subtlety and nuance. But even with this added facility, communication between the two breaks down. Delany seems to suggest that, as a corollary to Mario Pei, the perfection or clarity of language depends on viewing it as a communication process. Berger and Luckmann’s contention that reality is mediated through language can be taken to mean that language itself is a reflective medium like a mirror, with language and civilisation poised on either side of the reflective interface, as Pei suggests.

Just after Forester ponders rhetorically “Who is this animal man?”, Delany has him observe his reflected image in a plate-glass window in a moment of peculiar disassociation (1966:7). It is interesting to note that, in an extract from *The Splendour and Misery of Bodies, of Cities*, Delany talks about the “multiplicity and iteration of image” as an extension of identity (1996:103), thus reiterating his interest in the dialectic between image and identity.

⁷ Meyers delivers some descriptive criticism of *Babel-17*, stating that the novel “is like a building of magnificent design, marred throughout by substandard materials. Most passers-by will be impressed by the architecture and never realise that the lights don’t work and the plumbing leaks”. More specifically, he notes that “the uninformed reader of *Babel-17* [surely implying the average SF fan, who can scarcely claim to be an expert in linguistics] receives misinformation about American Indian languages, English vowels, the effect of first-language speech patterns on second languages, the distinction between specific and general, and computer languages” (1980:180). However, Meyers notes that the novel’s many errors are largely peripheral to the story itself, and could be corrected easily in a simple revision. He concludes that, “considering all his work, Delany is the most adventurous and thoughtful writer concerning himself with human communication” (1980:182).

⁸ The muse here is no doubt Marilyn Hacker.

Forester and Wong are only able to communicate with each other on a superficial, business-like level about the conundrum of Babel-17 which, she informs the General, is indeed a language and not a code (1966:8). Forester is dismissive of the distinction, but it is important as it means that Babel-17 is probably as recomplicated and diffuse as any form of language, and cannot be broken down into one-on-one or constituent signifiers/signifieds. This also implies that understanding Babel-17 requires a basic comprehension of the people who speak it, and vice versa. In other words, a basic understanding of the language implies, by definition, a basic understanding of the social structure, which is where language functions to maintain and replicate the social system. An interesting question is whether the link between social reality and language is akin to the correlation between written symbols and their meaning? This is how Delany explains the functioning of Babel-17:

... there are two types of codes. In the first, letters, or symbols that stand for letters, are shuffled and juggled according to a pattern. In the second, letters, words, or groups of words are replaced by other letters, symbols or words ... once you find the key, you just plug it in and out come logical sentences. A language, however, has its own internal logic, its own grammar, its own way of putting thoughts together with words that span various spectra of meaning. There is no key you can plug in to unlock the exact meaning. At best you can get a close approximation. (1966:9)

Once again doubt is cast on the notion that language is a medium reflecting some kind of objective, quantifiable sense of meaning. Delany gives some insight into Wong's past and her incredible facility with languages, described as an innate ability of "distinguishing grammatical order from random rearrangement" (1966:11-12). That she is also a "fair mathematician" (1966:11) and has progressed from being a governmental translator to a brief stint in military cryptography, and finally to fame and fortune as a poet, is Delany's inversion of the cliché of the artist as an anti-social bohemian.

What is not clearly defined is Wong's status as an outsider or even pariah due to her somewhat freakish ability. The fact that she is not from Earth adds to her exotic and mysterious status. Her interaction with Forester, and his instinctive attraction towards her, clearly mitigates against perceiving her as a misunderstood intellectual forced to apply her unique abilities from society's boundary. But chapter two of the novel, beginning with the sentence "Mocky, help me!" (1966:15) reveals the vulnerable and dependent side of her character.

Wong turns to Dr Markus T'mwarba, affectionately referred to as Mocky, for help and comfort. It is significant that T'mwarba is called upon for mentorship at two central crisis points in the novel: at the beginning, when she first encounters the

insidious nature of Babel-17, and at the end, when the alien language has almost erased her identity. T'mwarba is a therapist who has treated her since she was 15 and is a surrogate parent as both her parents died during the second embargo. As a poet and polymath, Wong is acutely aware of the pitfalls of communication. She confesses to her mentor about the miscommunication in her encounter with Forester:

"He thought I didn't understand. He thought nothing had been communicated. And I was angry. I was hurt. All the misunderstandings that tie the world up and keep people apart were quivering before me at once, waiting for me to untangle them, explain them, and I couldn't. I didn't know the words, the grammar, the syntax." (Delany 1966:21)

Wong confides to T'mwarba that Babel-17 scares her even more than Forester, a revelation of the extent to which she has hidden her own true feelings from the General. She says Babel-17 displays the strange structural attribute of 'compactness' in that it is small, tight and close together (1966:21). But then she offers the contradictory notion that when she begins to 'see' into Babel-17, she sees 'too much' (1966:22). From a structuralist point of view, language is dense or compact in that its constituent signs are, in turn, made up of inseparable signifiers (letters or words) and signifieds (concepts).

Of course, associating a particular signifier with a corresponding signified is totally arbitrary (Robey 1986:47). Wong recounts an acute anxiety attack at age 13 brought on by a talking mynah bird conversationally telling her: "'Hello, Rydra, it's a fine day out and I'm happy!'" (Delany 1966:23). It is only towards the end of the novel that the real reason for her horror becomes clear: the mental image that accompanied the words the bird had been trained to speak was that of its next meal, an earthworm, and Wong was able to discern the arbitrary relationship between signifier and signified, which left her with a sense of dissociation (1966:125).

Derrida warns that the sign must not be seen as a substitute for something as this negates the concept of *différance*, which is non-substantive and non-hierarchical (Jefferson 1986:115). Signification is ultimately dependent on difference or contrast (Culler 1979: 164), and thus *différance* "is the force behind, or rather in language; it produces the effects of difference which make up language" (Jefferson 1986:114). Babel-17 is so different from anything else Wong has yet experienced that it scares her with its possibilities of enhancing perception and perhaps even remaking reality. But the only way she is capable of even making an attempt at understanding it is to determine how it differs from her own linguistic frame of reference. As Weedman puts it, "to find out how the language works, she must be cognizant of how her own language works" (1982:44).

“[...] most textbooks say language is a mechanism for expressing thought [...] But language is thought. Thought is information given form. The form is language. The form of this language is ... amazing.” (Delany 1966:22)

Wong remarks further that “when you learn another tongue, you learn the way another people see the world, the universe” (1966:22). On a different level, we ‘learn’ the world of the novel *Babel-17* by ‘reading’ the codes and conventions of SF, which is a form of language in itself.

After revealing that she knows where the next act of sabotage involving Babel-17 is likely to take place, and affirming her determination to “find out who speaks this language” in order to “find out who, or what, in the Universe thinks that way” (1966:22–23), the action shifts to Transport Town in the third chapter of the novel as Wong enlists the assistance of customs officer Danil D. Appleby to ‘approve’ her spaceship crew on the spot – that is, match ‘psyche-ratings’ to achieve optimum compatibility. Even though she herself is a spaceship captain, this is one of the bureaucratic formalities she has to fulfil in order to get a crew together (and again this emphasizes communication and relationships).

In keeping with the theme of the unnamed ‘port city’ at the beginning of the novel, Delany likens spaceflight to captaining a real oceangoing ship, as the “pilot’s nervous system is connected directly with the controls” (1966:35–36). Unlike the conventional hi-tech space-opera stereotype, technology is rendered subordinate, with the emphasis on skill, instinct, and human interaction. Wong chooses a pilot by going to a wrestling venue and gauging the physical responses of various contestants – which is as finely-calibrated a skill as the task of piloting itself. Wong comments on the relationship between art and science:

“As of yet, the Customs work involved in getting ships from star to star is a science. The transport work manoeuvring through hyperstasis levels is still an art. In a hundred they may both be sciences [...] But today a person who learns the rules of art well is a little rarer than the person who learns the rules of science.” (Delany 1966:42)

The navigational component of a spaceship crew is known as a ‘triple’, described as “a close, precarious, emotional and sexual relation with two other people” (1966:38), representing a radical social compact playing on the permutations of the traditional binary male–female relationship.⁹ Ironically, it is the task of

⁹ As revealed in *The Motion of Light in Water* (1990), Delany was involved in a real ‘triple’: “... what happened between Bob, Marilyn, and me was not some fetishised ‘perversion’ sought as a replicable object, but rather three people relating (personally, sexually, socially) within the margins of their own sexual possibilities ...” (1990:430). Thus even the most fantastic and revolutionary aspects of *Babel-17*, such as the notion of a ‘triple’ as a radical reinvention of normal relationships, is based in lived experience, adding to Delany’s contention that SF is not about the future, but the present.

conservative, law-abiding Appleby to determine the psychological compatibility of such a triple. His innate conservativeness is indicated by the fact that he is hesitant to wander around Transport Town at night. Delany's description is lush and vivid, and skilfully blends realistic observation with fantastic detail:

... the streets were smaller, and a continuous whine of transport ships fell across the sky. Warehouses and repair and supply shops, sandwiched rickety apartments and rooming houses. A larger street cut past, rumbling with traffic, busy loaders, stellarmen. They passed neon entertainments, restaurants of many worlds, bars and brothels. (1966: 25–26)

Appleby, whose very surname seems to suggest all-American wholesomeness, is a peripheral but important character who appears again at the end of the novel. His response to the idea of a 'triple' is to label the participants as 'perverts' (1966:38). Calli criticises him for clinging to the comfort zone of his orderly existence, without ever having the inclination to break free (1966:37–38). Similarly, Babel-17 is not only indicative of a totally different world view, but probably a whole new lived reality as well – and the aim in comprehending it is to break through the barrier posed by the alien language in order to comprehend this different reality. The mystery of Babel-17 is liberating in its potential. But to seize this potential requires significant courage, and a willingness to cross boundaries, as it poses a direct challenge to an undeviating and fixed world view. Appleby represents this idyllic central locus of social harmony, but rather than representing a position of strength, his position is ultimately a stultifying source of weakness. His inability to see beyond the limitations of his own world view, or his lack of desire to push the social envelope, is a form of cultural blindness concealed by such euphemisms as duty and social responsibility.

Wong plays on Appleby's compelling notion of duty and, in a sense, entices him to take a walk on the dark side through the underbelly of Transport Town. Thus he symbolically crosses the boundary from his own comfortable and familiar world to an adjacent co-existing one where his status and knowledge signify nothing. Delany argues that society has no centre, and merely consists of intersecting boundaries (the fact that the Discorporate Zone is an even more forbidding no-go area within Transport Town itself underlines this idea). In other words, the comfortable regulated world that Appleby inhabits is not the centre of the social universe. Delany comments further:

But really I don't think our society has a centre – or, I suspect, did it ever. Centrality was, at best, a stabilising illusion. At worst it was an oppressive and exploitative lie. All I think is or was is a system of intersecting margins [...] The phrase recalls Derrida's 'the signifier of the signifier' as the model for all signification. (1994a:71)

The wrestling visited by Wong is another boundary containing that which society cannot tolerate, but just because society has sanctioned, and even assimilated such activity, by enclosing it in a social boundary, does not mean it is any less diluted or atavistic. The sailor motif is elaborated upon further when Wong likens the ‘cosmetisurgery’ of the contestants to tattoos. It is significant that the pilot she eventually selects, simply known as Brass, wins against someone called the Silver Dragon – for Delany, dragons have always been a symbol of free expression and *jouissance* (from the winged creatures in *They Fly at Çiron* to the Evelmi in *Stars in my Pocket like Grains of Sand*). The theme of the pitfalls of communication is again reiterated when Appleby is “hustled by a succubus” (1966:40), and finds the experience trivialised by words when he attempts to convey its essence:

... still trying to regain her face, her words, her shape. But it stayed away, frustrating as the imperative comment that leaves your mind as speech begins, and the mouth is left empty, a lost reference to love. (Delany 1966:42)

Also important is the fact that one of the crew members selected by Wong, known as Mollya Twa, cannot speak English. Her reason for selecting her is that it will give the crew time to get acquainted with her before they “can say anything really foolish” (1966:45). It is also an example of the linguistic learning process they will have to undergo in attempting to fathom the intricacies of Babel-17. The *Rimbaud* is apparently sabotaged and becomes stranded in space without instruments. Wong solves the problem of determining their location without any navigational aids by referring “to another language in order to think about the problem clearly” (1966:57), and this is Babel-17. The highly mathematical solution to their predicament involves intersecting circular planes and a bag of marbles. Wong explains that the term for ‘Great Circle’ in Babel-17 contains more precise information than its English counterpart and, more specifically, that “it carries the information right in the word” (1966:56). Babel-17 is more information-dense, and in written form uses less space than any four or five languages she knows combined.

William Schuyler explains that philosophers refer to this linguistic mode of cognition as the “picture theory of meaning”, and contends that Babel-17 must therefore be a ‘picture’ language (1982:89, 90). Schuyler attempts to examine whether or not a language with the characteristics of Babel-17 is at all tenable, ultimately concluding that it is not. But this misses the point, as Delany is more interested in examining functioning structural aspects of language than developing artificial new linguistic structures, though it is interesting to note the linguistic terminology he attributes to Wong in order to lend veracity to her investigation into Babel-17. The

three areas she has identified are possible phonemic structure, probable phonetic structure, and finally siotic, semantic and syntactic ambiguities (1966:50).¹⁰

Wong and her crew are invited for dinner at the residence of Baron Ver Dorco, who is “in charge of co-ordinating the various research projects against the Invaders” (1966:62). She ponders the upsetting fact that “her poems were popular on both sides”, for, “born a galaxy away, she might as easily have been an Invader” (1966:60). Reflecting the arbitrary nature of the signifiers ‘Alliance’ and ‘Invader’, this idea will ultimately become the weapon with which she ends the Invasion itself. Wong does not realise that, through her work, she has achieved what both warring sides have dismally failed at thus far: communication.

Ver Dorco says of the Alliance: “‘We live in a world of isolated communities, each hardly touching its neighbour, each speaking, as it were, a different language’” (1966:60) – in other words, a post-Tower of Babel society. Furthermore, he believes that “‘without the Invasion, something for the Alliance to focus its energies upon, our society would disintegrate’” (1966:60). Jebel Tarik expands on Ver Dorco’s concerns:

... with all nine species of galaxy-hopping life forms, each as widespread as our own, each as technically intelligent, with as complicated an economy, seven of them engaged in the same war we are, still we hardly ever run into them, and they run into us or each other about as frequently [...] because compatibility factors for communication are incredibly low. (Delany 1966:122)

How probable then is the extract from the Marilyn Hacker poem that forms the epigraph to part three, where she writes: “I would make a language we could all speak?” (1966:88), for as she observes in the epigraph to part one: “... Here is the hub of ambiguity” (1966:5)? What are the chances of perfecting civilisation through the linguistic matrix that constitutes it if language itself is so impermanent and diffuse? Delany leaves this central paradox unresolved in *Babel-17*, but returns to some of its implications in *They Fly at Çiron*.

Ver Dorco gives Wong a guided tour of some “gross, uncivilised weapons” perfected by the Alliance, but comments that the true weapon “is the knowledge of what to do with what you have” (1966:65)¹¹ – which, as demonstrated in *They Fly at Çiron*, also includes using language as a weapon. It is interesting to note how Ver Dorco’s frank and shocking views on the art and economics of warfare – which, given the date of the novel’s publication, can also be seen as a reference to the Vietnam War – are light years apart from the conventional gung-ho bluster of space opera. The

¹⁰ Delany could just be showing off here, of course, trying to dazzle the reader with jargon.

¹¹ This reminds one of Foucault’s dictum that ‘knowledge is power’, as expressed in such books as *The Order of Things* (1970) and *The Archaeology of Knowledge*.

prime exhibit is TW-55, a human spy genetically engineered to the limits of perfection, the physical counterpart of the linguistic perfection of Babel-17. It reflects Ver Dorco's Aryan-like view of human evolution:

Medical science has progressed so that all sorts of hopeless human refuse lives and reproduces at a frightening rate – inferior creatures that would have been too weak to survive a handful of centuries ago. (Delany 1966:69)

This is a more radical interpretation of Forester's original question, "Who is this animal man?"¹² (1966:6), and the difficulty of quantifying individuality. But, for Delany, such so-called 'human refuse' represents the diversity, creativity and sheer hunger for life that ultimately distinguishes those masses that so intimidate Forester. In Delany's physical description of an eventual member of Wong's crew, physical attributes are exaggerated to suggest the potency, virility and physical menace of a marginalised character who has asserted his individuality by inhabiting a social boundary:

... Ron was small, thin, with uncannily sharp muscular definition: pectorals like scored metal plates beneath drawn wax skin; stomach like ridged hosing, arms like braided cables ... He was unkempt and towheaded and sapphire-eyed, but the only cosmetisurgery evident was the bright rose growing on his shoulder ... (Delany 1966:30)

This highly romanticised view of perfection through marginalisation is concretised in the fantastic creatures known as the Winged Ones in *They Fly at Çiron*.

Delany uses the Ver Dorco dinner to give a stylised, satirical portrait of the Alliance's ruling class intersected by the marginal and altogether different vision of society represented by Wong's spaceship crew. The two meet and mingle uncomfortably, and butt against the social boundary separating them. Delany uses imagery of appetite and hunger as a grim counterpoint to the scenes of cannibalism evoked at the beginning of the novel. Ver Dorco's wife says to Wong: "You bring something so cool and pleasing, so fresh, so crisp", which makes the crew resemble a salad (1966:75), a deliberate metaphor on the part of the Baroness, who shrewdly notes that her society would devour Wong and her band of misfits if given half the chance. By 'devour' she implies assimilating or homogenising the differences that challenge or even threaten her own orderly, staid society. This highly ritualised society, where individuality itself has been turned into a mechanised social function to rid it of any unpredictability or spontaneity, is symbolised by the banquet that the

¹² The juxtaposition of 'animal' with 'man' is particularly ironic. Of course, Forester's existential conundrum is one of SF's 'great themes'.

Baroness controls from her seat by pushing a sequence of buttons. She explains to Wong the impact her crew has had: "... you come to us and immediately we start to learn things, things about you, and ultimately about ourselves" (1966:75).¹³

The irony here is that, though Wong's crew and the Ver Dorcos speak the same language, the communication gulf that separates them is akin to Babel-17. The Ver Dorcos use language in a more ornate and elaborate way to render meaning opaque and ambiguous – thus what the Baroness says is essentially meaningless beyond its phatic value. Wong, on the other hand, sees language as a transparent or reflective medium that enhances or facilitates interaction and social cohesion, which is why Babel-17 is a such a frustration and a challenge. Where she sees a challenge, the Ver Dorcos see a threat, as they use language to codify social interaction. Their world and its ways are as if cast in stone, and thus they are unable to comprehend the true significance of Babel-17.

In keeping with the theme of language as communication medium, the Baroness is described as "a muffled, vast vacuous silence" (1966:72), and Wong notes that "the small muscle shifts, those counter communications that she was used to in direct communication, were blunted in the Baroness under the fat" (1966:72). Ver Dorco himself is described as forming words "as languidly as the slow mandibles of the cannibal mantis" (1966:61), while Ron observes that the guests 'eat' Wong with their hungry eyes (1966:77).

A similar banquet scene occurs in *They Fly at Çiron*, where the Winged Ones arrange a feast in honour of the groundling Rahm who had saved the Handsman Vortcir from a giant spider-like creature in a cave. Unlike the Ver Dorco dinner, which is a carefully choreographed social ballet, the feast put on by the Winged Ones is spontaneous, given openly to sensory pleasure and a celebration of their communal lifestyle. Rahm notes that "around him the Winged Ones caroused through the deepening evening" (1993:99–100). Here food, in its mutual sharing and consumption, also has sexual connotations, with the meal itself an elaborate affirmation of life.

A crucial function of the banquet scene in *Babel-17* is to bring Wong and her crew closer together, with Ron accusing the poet of being incapable of understanding the intimacy of a triple's functioning: "You write what you see. Not what you do" (1966:76). But Wong reveals she is indeed a legitimate member of this social margin as she herself had been tripled with Muels Aranlyde (1966:76).

Wong encounters an enigmatic stranger who describes the Baron as Cassius with a "lean and hungry look" (1966:81). This is prophetic for the stranger, later

¹³ Delany uses the banquet to ritualise social interaction, which nevertheless is always unpredictable. Thus the Baroness can control the food, but not the interaction.

revealed to be TW-55 gone rogue, kills Ver Dorco during the banquet, and causes the Baroness's carefully-orchestrated culinary spectacle to descend into chaos. The first sign of the murder is a trickle of blood 'worming' from beneath the Baron's face (1966:84), a metaphor echoing Wong's earlier thought on realising there must be a saboteur aboard her spaceship: "Somewhere in Eden, now, a worm, a worm" (1966:63). The use of the word 'Eden' also suggests that she sees her ship as a microcosmic idealised society, and also recalls the utopian potential of Babel-17.

The last chapter of part two simply ends with the single word "And—" (1966:87) as Delany breaks into a stream-of-consciousness technique to convey Wong's thought processes in Babel-17. It also symbolises a breakdown of traditional boundaries of communication as she is undergoing an epistemological crisis centred on the language that defines her self-identity. Wong realises that this identity is a social construct mediated by the symbolic properties of language, and not an expression of innate qualities attributable to a discrete character. This means she is what she has been named in terms of her work, social standing, and even social interaction:

Names? What's in a name? What name am I? ... Words are names for things. In Plato's time things were names for ideas – what better description of the Platonic Ideal? But were words names for things, or was that just a bit of semantic confusion? Words were symbols for whole categories of things ... 'My name is Rydra!' An individual, a thing apart from its environment, and apart from all things in that environment, an individual was a type of thing for which symbols were inadequate, and so names were invented. I am invented. (Delany 1966:88)

On another level Delany is playing on the difference between the sign and the symbol. Saussure's theory of the sign as a basic element of communication ignores the referent or external object referred to by a sign, which led to American philosopher CS Pierce differentiating between the symbol, icon and index as different types of signs (Baldick 1990:205). Thus, as Slusser notes, the 'webbing' that restrains Wong becomes an ambiguous symbol for the social matrix in which individuals are either bound and entangled, or united, by language (1977:39). Thinking in Babel-17, Wong attempts to name the webbing that restrains her, for as she notes at the beginning of the chapter, something cannot be thought about if there is no word for it (Delany 1966:88). Schuyler explains that Delany's inadequate attempt to convey the linguistic mechanisms of an alien language in English is a retrospective comment on the failures or limitations of language in general (1982:91). The level of structural depth Delany accords to his elaborate working description of Babel-17, which

Schuyler notes is the fullest such description in the entire novel (1982:92), is a remarkably sustained exercise in omission, implication, and suggestion:

She 'something at the something'. The first something was a tiny vocable that implied an immediate, but passive, perception that could be aural or olfactory as well as visual. The second something was three equally tiny phonemes that blended at different musical pitches: one, an indicator that fixed the size of the chamber at roughly twenty-five feet long and cubical, the second identifying the colour and probable substance of the walls – some blue metal – while the third was at once a place holder for particles that should denote the room's function when she discovered it, and a sort of grammatical tag by which she could refer to the whole experience with only the one symbol for as long as she needed. All four sounds took less time on her tongue and in her mind than the one clumsy diphthong in 'room'. (Delany 1966:90)

Weedman's comment that Wong is only able to perceive the pattern that is the webbing and so discover its weak point by thinking mathematically is a too-literal interpretation of the revelation later that Babel-17 is akin to a computer language (1982:44). What is important about Babel-17 is the unique mode of perception it engenders, and the impact this has on Wong's gestalt and traditional world view, and not the mathematical possibilities of its linguistic structure, though it is interesting to note that the first problem Wong solves using Babel-17 – when the *Rimbaud* is dead in space – is a mathematical conundrum.

Following the webbing incident, Wong meets three of her captors, whom she is unable to place as Alliance or Invader as they are not readily identifiable, while the cosmetisurgery they sport conceals as much as it asserts individuality (Delany 1966:96). To name or identify is to assert control or power over something, and thus Wong's lack of knowledge places her at an immediate disadvantage. She eventually learns that Jebel Tarik and his cohorts are looters, predatory mercenaries on the border of the Alliance–Invader war and tolerated for the scavenging role they fulfil, an amplification of Delany's view that society has no centre but simply comprises intersecting margins.

Realising that the pattern of spacecraft superimposed on a grid of space coordinates is simply another version of the restraining webbing that she had broken by defining its weakest point, Wong enters Babel-17 mode again when Tarik goes to the assistance of an Alliance supply ship tracked by an Invader destroyer, and helps the looters break the enemy's defense net (1966:103, 106). It is significant that the first Invader we encounter in the novel is a seven-month pregnant female, but instead of evoking reader sympathy, Delany accentuates the alienness of the Invaders by having Tarik comment that the Invaders place pregnant women on fighting ships as they have

faster reflexes (1966:107). This defamiliarises patriarchal stereotypes of pregnant women as being helpless, but also makes sense in terms of protecting the species.

Ironically, the character known simply as the Butcher, a name redolent of a violent existence in a violent war, makes a futile attempt to save the Invader foetus through surgery. Wong's first encounter with the Butcher leads her to the crucial realisation that he is incapable of articulating the concept of 'I' (1966:111). She also further refines her understanding of the way Babel-17 functions:

It was not only a language, she understood now, but a flexible matrix of analytical possibilities where the name 'word' defined the stresses in a webbing of medical bandage, or a defensive grid of spaceships. What would it do with the tensions and yearnings in a human face? Perhaps the flicker of eyelids and fingers would become mathematics, without meaning. (Delany 1966:112)

Schuyler remarks that "the possibility of a language with the characteristics of Babel-17 rests on certain assumptions about the human mind, the nature of knowledge, and the ways in which we can know" (1982:88). One of these assumptions is that the distinction between self and other is crucial for an individual to be able to function in society, but the Butcher clearly lacks this understanding, which leads to the question of whether or not he is, or can ever be, truly self-aware. Schuyler argues that the structure of Babel-17 imposes a specific mode of cognition upon the speaker, and since the language inherently contains all the information required, the Butcher is still able to perceive a gestalt or pattern, which becomes the self.

Insofar as he can conceive of being an individual, he will think of himself as the whole pattern – his physical self will not be bounded by the surface of his body. Thus he can conceive of action, but only in terms of the pattern acting to alter itself. (Schuyler 1982:90)

The Butcher's peculiar and apparently contradictory mode of cognition is also a reflection of the underpinning theoretical assumptions of structuralism, which, as Eagleton notes, is concerned with the general laws of structures, and only considers the individual units of systems in relation to each other and not as discrete entities (1983:94). Therefore an effect of structuralism is "the 'decentring' of the individual, who is no longer to be regarded as the source or end of meaning" (Eagleton 1983:40). The fact that 'meaning' is a construct not only implies that humans share systems of signification, but that meaning cannot be said to originate with any single individual:

... language predated the individual, and was much less his or her product than he or she was the product of it ... the way you interpreted your world was a

function of the languages you had at your disposal, and there was evidently nothing immutable about these ... Reality was not reflected by language but produced by it. (Eagleton 1983:108–109)

Derrida's campaign to reverse the privileging of speech over writing is also important in this context as writing "is that mode of language use in which the human individual is not present to authenticate it" (Sturrock 1979:14). Language is "the most fundamental element of all in our socialisation" (Sturrock 1979:12), and it is 'impersonal' because "it exceeds us as individuals", which implies that to use language is to surrender some aspect of our individuality (Sturrock 1979:12).

Saussure's observation that language is a form and not a substance indicates the proper concern of structuralism to be the "relations between mutually conditioned elements of a system and not between self-contained essences" (Sturrock 1979:10), as meaning cannot exist without difference, which implies a systemic or relational approach. In terms of a text written by an individual author, this then implies that the text has been 'set free' from its conditions of production, and that 'the meanings it will henceforth yield ... will depend on who reads it and in what circumstances' (Sturrock 1979:14). This represents the singular strength of structuralism – though language "has powers we cannot control" (Sturrock 1979:15), it "invites us to delight in the plurality of meaning this opens up, to reject the authoritarian or unequivocal interpretation of signs" (Sturrock 1979:15).

Language plays a crucial role in forming and articulating individuality. By positing a character with a radically different concept of self-awareness, Delany reveals how identity is mediated through language. The character of the Butcher can also be seen as a profound criticism of structuralism. Structuralism is opposed to humanism, and "has carried its strong bias against essentialism so far as to somehow deny the existence of human beings altogether" (Sturrock 1979:13). Thus the Butcher can be perceived as "an unstable, replaceable form within a soulless system" (Sturrock 1979:13).

This is achieved through his action of actually killing someone – but since the Butcher has no understanding of 'I', by definition he can entertain no concept of 'murder'. However, the reader judges his actions from an individualistic basis – that is, from the viewpoint of his or her linguistic (and also conceptual and moral) framework. From the Butcher's viewpoint, he has simply reacted to external events, but the act of murder also reveals that he is lacking some vital component. Delany uses the shocking incident of the killing to impress upon the reader the inhumanity of the Butcher, which is also signified graphically by his name. This leads to the proposition that, if the Butcher cannot comprehend 'I', then it must mean that he has no self-identity, and thus he cannot be said to form a part of society. However, he can

never be said to be totally beyond the boundaries of society as he inevitably interacts with other people. The Butcher ‘embodies’ the very qualities that make Babel-17 such a mystery and a threat, but he is more a social cipher than a self-aware individual.

Wong’s quest to comprehend the nature of the Butcher’s identity is to attempt to restore his sense of self-identity. To be able to do this she has to learn the language he speaks in order to understand his terms of reference, and then in a sense she has to reprogramme his linguistic ability – a significant metaphor as Babel-17 is akin to a computer language. Computers also have the connotation of being cold and lifeless, which emphasises the anti-humanism of Babel-17, which, in turn, is a reflection of the anti-individualism of structuralism itself. An interesting appendix to this debate is Naä’s contemplation of “a single great consciousness” in *They Fly at Çiron* when asked by Rimgia what happens after death:¹⁴

Well, according to those elders, you and I are not really alive – we’re not really living our lives, here and now What we think and feel and experience as our own consciousness, living through moment after moment, is really the one great consciousness reading our lives, from our birth to our death, as if one of us were just an entry in Ienbar’s scrolls. (Delany 1993:30)

Here Delany relates the concepts of individuality and identity to reading and writing: individuals are like marks on a page and, in the process of understanding those marks, comes the realisation that the marks cannot exist in isolation as they form part of a process.¹⁵ In terms of structuralism, reducing individuals to patterns in a system is not a deliberate ploy to negate individuality, but is intended to comprehend the parameters of the articulation of identity, especially through language – whose characteristic use marks us as individuals, but which is shared by all, and perhaps exceeds us all. This shows how complicated the structuralist debate is – stressing the lack of humanism in structuralism, without taking into account anything else, is a simple binary reduction. But nevertheless one has to be aware of the claim of possible anti-humanist trends within structuralism. Therefore the anti-humanist elements of *Babel-17*, such as the character of the Butcher, is part of the structuralist debate.

Wong uses a combination of Babel-17 and her skills at reading body language, which she finally realises is actually a form of telepathy (in other words, an intuitive, non-verbal form of communication that, in a sense, is a picture language just like Babel-17) as “the nexus of old talent and a new way of thinking” that “opened worlds

¹⁴ This is a fairly common idea in Hindu and Buddhist philosophy.

¹⁵ The ‘great consciousness’ is, of course, also the author ‘reading’ the lives of his characters as he writes them. But to what extent can the characters be said to ‘write’ their own lives, or is this just anthropomorphising the creative process?

of perception, of action” (Delany 1966: 117), to form a ‘wordview’ of Geoffrey Cord and his plan to assassinate Tarik. But extended immersion in this type of cognition physically sickens Wong, which seems to indicate that humans are not physiologically adapted for such a heightened form of perception and communication.

The Butcher promptly, and casually, kills Cord, which horrifies Wong with the contradiction of such “egoless brutality” displayed in a human being (1966:117). But she notes revealingly that, “though bloody handed, he was safer than the precision of the world linguistically corrected” (1966:117). Here Delany implies that, if our concept of language approaches the analytical perfection realised in Babel-17, then language would paradoxically surrender its meaning, for which it is dependent on difference, plurality, and multivalency – precisely the linguistic phenomena excised by Babel-17.

At the end of the novel, Wong concludes that the fundamental flaw of the language is its exclusion of the symbolic process, “which is the way we distinguish between reality and our expression of reality” (1966:170). In other words, the language is the buffer or filter between ourselves and the real world. Wong does not realise immediately that the Butcher is a native speaker of Babel-17, which is a surprising lapse of her formidable analytical abilities. But this omission could be linked to that part of her character blinding her to the fact that she herself had sabotaged the *Rimbaud*. She had done this out of a subconscious fear of discovering who spoke and thought in such a language, as solving the conundrum posed by the alien language posed a radical threat to her own self-identity.

When she did indeed arrive at a solution, what then? How would she have changed, and would she be aware of exactly how much she had changed? Would she still perceive the world in the same way as before, or would her very perception be altered or contaminated? She attempts to teach the Butcher the concept of ‘I’, but realises this is simply developing a private language for the two of them instead of a mutual exchange of linguistic frames of reference. A ‘perfect’ language defeats its purpose if no one can understand it, and such understanding can only be shared through common terms of reference.

Despite Delany noting earlier that compatibility factors for communication between different species are low, Tarik’s forces are assisted by a Ciribian ship when attacked by the Invaders. Wong ponders the futility of the Invasion in general, and notes that, though nobody likes it, it simply carries on by the sheer force of its own momentum (1966:130), as its terms of reference are never called into question.

Entitled ‘The Butcher’, part four begins with a telepathic mind-meld between Wong and the ex-convict, described as entering him “in some bewildering, reversed sexuality” (1966:144):

... her mind shook inside his, curving to his pain or pleasure, strange emotions because they were ego-less and inarticulate, magic, seductive, mythical. (Delany 1966:144)

The Butcher is able to discern the pattern in Wong's mind that defines her poetic consciousness, which affirms Schuyler's comment that this form of cognition would primarily recognise such patterns in lieu of self-identity or self-awareness. The Butcher notes that the word 'poet' in Greek means maker or builder, indicating the process of how she uses language as a construction tool to make an end product in the form of the tangible structure of a poem. Furthermore, the Butcher notes that he perceives "the pattern named The Criminal and artistic consciousness meeting in the same head with one language between them ..." (1966:145). The conflation of artist and criminal, an embryonic idea in *Babel-17*, and explored more fully in *Dhalgren* (1974), suggests that both are marginalised social roles, and that both perform essentially the same function of dislocation – that is, probing the paradigms of society from its borders, where those very paradigms begin to unravel. It also suggests that creativity may issue from social transgression, a very Romantic idea.

Significantly, Delany describes Wong as being mirrored in the Butcher's mind, which recalls the beginning of the novel and General Forester pondering his own image reflected in a plateglass window. The term 'reversed sexuality' used to describe the intimacy of the mind-meld refers to the reversal of identity engendered by this mirroring process, as well as the notion of marginality sexuality in *Babel-17* as a whole, especially the concept of the triple as a functioning social and sexual unit.

Part five reintroduces customs officer Danil D. Appleby who, enamoured with Wong and her exotic friends upon their initial acquaintance, decides to revisit the "delightfully ethnic" meeting place (1966:150) where he had witnessed Brass wrestle with the Silver Dragon. Noting that, though such activity is still considered illegal, it is nonetheless fascinating, Appleby exclaims to T'mwarba:

I saw a bunch of the weirdest, oddest people I had ever met in my life, who thought different, and acted different, and even made love different. And they made me laugh, and get angry, and be happy, and be sad, and excited, and even fall in love a little ... And they didn't seem so weird or strange anymore. (Delany 1966:153–154)

In other words, despite their status as social misfits, they evoked 'normal' reactions in Appleby, which leads him to the realisation that his perception of eccentricity is just that – his own construct, based on the norms and values that society at large upholds. The point is that, if we relativise marginality, we must also interrogate normality.

Appleby decides to pay a visit to the cosmetisurgery establishment *PlastiPlasm Plus* ('Addendums, Superscripts and Footnotes to the Beautiful Body'), and have a miniature dragon in a cage grafted to his shoulder as a symbol of his new broadmindedness in tolerating, accepting, and embracing social deviance (1966:151–152). Bearing in mind that Delany regards the dragon as a symbol of *jouissance*, the miniature version that Appleby has attached to his nervous system, and which he can make "whistle, hiss, roar, flap his wings and spit sparks" (1966:152) satirises the fact that his new knowledge is only skin deep.

Appleby's intersection with the social margin represented by Wong has left no lasting impression upon him and, as with General Forester, communication has failed. Society may have no centre and only comprise intersecting margins, but Delany pessimistically suggests that the social dislocation needed to appreciate this view is beyond ordinary humans, who cling blindly to what they know best.

The discorporate crew tell T'mwarba that "sometimes worlds exist under your eyes and you never see", and that Wong "cut through worlds, and joined them ... so that both became bigger" (1966:162–163). After Wong breaks the mind-meld with the Butcher that had merged their identities into a single personality, she tells T'mwarba that "the word for Alliance in Babel-17 translates literally into English as: one-who-has-invaded" (1966:170), a linguistic echo of the role reversal originally used to describe the mind-meld.

She writes the best prose sentence of her career, namely: "This war will end within six months", which is circulated to top Alliance officials so it can be "semantically imprinted" on their minds (1966:173). Ironically, there is nothing earth-shatteringly original about this utterly prosaic line; certainly it did not need the calibre of a poet of Wong's stature to write it. But the point is that it took someone of her intellectual ability to be able to understand Babel-17 and its functioning, which is what ultimately makes the sentence such an artistic achievement: it expresses precisely how the alien language functions, and uses that understanding to achieve the end of the ruinous invasion. Wong also notes that the Alliance has the best possible tool with which to realise this statement as truth – namely Babel-18. This is also a political expression of the connection between language and power.

Whereas *Babel-17* is recognisably SF in that it is clear the author has welded his linguistic concerns to a conventional space-opera framework, *They Fly at Çiron* (1993) is more problematic to identify and locate in a particular genre as Delany uses those very linguistic concerns to generate generic dislocation. The peculiar problem of generic pigeonholing posed by SF and fantasy can be highlighted by Baldick's definition of the term – which, it must be noted, is merely a sample of the surfeit of definitions currently available.

Baldick describes fantasy as “a general term for any kind of fictional work that is not primarily devoted to realistic representation of the known world” (1990:81), and SF as “a popular modern branch of prose fiction that explores the probable consequences of some improbable or impossible transformation of the basic conditions of human (or intelligent non-human existence”) (1990:200).¹⁶ *They Fly at Çiron* is an example of a novel that partakes of the qualities given in both definitions without fitting comfortably into either camp, which suggests that the difference between these two genres may only be a matter of degree.

The novel is fantasy in that the Winged Ones are clearly an extrapolation of a stock fantasy trope, namely dragons;¹⁷ but the way Delany logically extrapolates the parameters of an alternate, possibly utopian society using the Winged Ones as a reference point also clearly makes it SF. From the viewpoint that the novel examines the intersection of an impossible rural idyll with the colonising forces of a larger civilisation, it may even be defined as a form of historical fantasy – which is an example of the recomplication of the traditional definition of SF.

In *Babel-17*, Delany conveys the ‘alienness’ of the language by revealing that it cannot be defined by another language, which demonstrates how language functions in maintaining social reality. He uses a similar, but slightly different, approach in *They Fly at Çiron* by adopting the world view of a people whose language is fundamentally similar to, yet crucially different, from the rest of the people that inhabit their world. The focus is what happens when it collides, or forcibly intersects with, antagonistic world views. This ‘collision’ produces the end result of *Babel-17* – namely, the ‘corrected’ version of the alien tongue that is simply numbered 18 – and Delany posits this as the fundamental strength and flexibility of language, namely its ability to adapt.

But if, as structuralism contends, our very identities and the social reality in which we are embedded are an inextricable outcome of language, what happens to our world view when that language changes or is challenged? Will there be a mighty fall as with the Tower of Babel or, as Mario Pei contends, will civilisation itself be rendered perfect when we come to the fundamental realisation that language – the very mirror-image of civilisation – is itself imperfect?

The prose poem at the beginning of *They Fly at Çiron* expands on the idea in *Babel-17* that compatibility factors for communication are low when dealing with opposing cultures and even different species. Delany suggests that harmonious

¹⁶ Edward James notes that “the borderline between fantasy and [SF] is one that has been endlessly debated ... the distinction between the two is blurred still more if the fantasy is being written, as it often has been, by writers of sf, who will often, playfully, treat magic with rigorous logic, effectively making it an alternative science” (1994:178–179).

¹⁷ Or angels?

interaction is possible, but such cultures that do intersect are inevitably altered by the encounter and, against the larger background of evolutionary progression, often fade into the mists of history.

Among the tribes and villages and hamlets and townships that ornament the world with their variety, many have
existed

in mutual support, exchange and friendship. Many others have stayed to themselves, regarding their neighbours with hostility and suspicion. Some have gone from one state to the other. Some have even gone back. But when the memory of a village is no older than the four or five generations it takes a grave-scroll record to rot, there is no history – only myth and song. (Delany 1993:13)

That the novel ends with just a myth – in the form of a separate short story that recounts the world of Çiron as the stuff of legend – suggests that neither the Çironians nor the Winged Ones ultimately survive as intact societies, which poses the further question of whether or not the cultural experience embodied by these societies has also been lost. This is the timeless tragedy of the Tower of Babel: that humanity struggles to reach a point of perfection, or even limited understanding, only to undergo a cyclical relapse that renders all earlier achievements meaningless.

In *They Fly at Çiron*, Delany posits a society that is Edenic in its perfection, but this very perfection is its downfall as it has no knowledge of alternative world views due to the fact that its language is the entire world that it inhabits. This means that the society lacks the crucial survival mechanism of being able to assimilate opposing views without being totally subsumed, which would strengthen its social matrix against dissolution in a larger cultural context. The key to that downfall is language, as the Çironians, who live in harmony with the natural world and each other, have no words for weapons of war, and thus are unable even to comprehend what is happening to them when their village is invaded by the colonising Myetrans. Like the Alliance in *Babel-17*, Myetra is a militaristic hierarchy bent on conquest as a means of expanding its boundaries to prevent its own extinction.

The novel begins with Prince Nactor callously shooting captives of war as they are “dogs”, and Lieutenant Kire trying to extract the reasoning for this inhumane act from his superiors without appearing insubordinate. It is interesting to note that Kire, a member of the ‘enemy’ camp, is used as a viewpoint character, as this subverts the traditional binary opposition of portraying the Myetrans negatively and the Çironians positively in terms of moral and ethical considerations. This tenuous boundary dividing the two camps is blurred further as it is unclear which ‘side’ the Winged Ones will support until the end of the novel. Delany introduces two crucial

signifiers in 'powergun' and 'Winged One' which, like 'Babel-17', are deconstructed and recomplicated throughout the course of the novel.

Darko Suvin writes that "SF is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional 'novum' (novelty, innovation) validated by cognitive logic" (1979:63). Suvin defines a novum as "a totalising phenomena or relationship deviating from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality" (1979:64), and argues that this is the "necessary condition" for SF, provided it is validated by "scientifically methodical cognition" (1979:65–66).

The novum focuses on 'newness' or 'difference', but seems to be merely an amplification of the traditional sign, rather than a totally new critical tool functioning in the context of SF. Delany argues that Suvin's strategy to unearth the "necessary and sufficient" conditions for SF is intrinsically doomed, as no other literary genre is thus defined. He comments further that "the dream of scientificity that haunted early structuralist criticism also haunts [SF]" (1994a:192). Delany favours deconstruction as a powerful literary instrument to pry apart the mechanisms of SF, with a particular emphasis on the traditional sign, as opposed to such alternative terminology as the novum. He explains that signs function to produce a web of meaning, an image he uses in both *Babel -17* and *They Fly at Çiron*:

... the general concept that meaning is not contained in the sign but is extrinsic to it, i.e., that the ontological location of meaning ... lies in the signifier's relation to other signifiers, and that the signified is therefore always a web of signifiers. (1994a:248).

This concept is critical to understanding *They Fly at Çiron*, which concerns language and the web of meaning it casts. At the same time as it analyses language from a structural perspective, it also uses language as a vehicle for literary expression, with these two aspects existing in relation to each other like opposite faces of a coin. In other words, writing about language can illuminate its functioning, but cannot step beyond its functioning, because it is also a construct. There is obviously no alternative to using language to write about language, but one has to be aware that, far from solving the problem, it merely takes it to another level of debate.

For example, Delany's linguistic ideas are at the forefront of *Babel-17* in the form of the technical discussion about the structure of the alien language, which is a metaphor for how our own language moulds our view of reality. Such ideas are implied more than they are stated explicitly in the narrative of *They Fly at Çiron*, where linguistic debate and the main story are integrated seamlessly. Delany's textual strategy differs in the two novels, but his aim is the same: to engender debate about language, through language.

They Fly at Çiron introduces us to the warlike Myetrans, who are dedicated to plunder and conquest in order to maintain the vitality and scope of their empire. The Alliance and Myetra can be said to represent the pinnacles of their respective civilisations, but the initial inference is that both these societal models are fundamentally flawed. The initial encounter between Forester and Wong takes the form of a class confrontation: Forester represents the military hierarchy that has a vested interest in the Invasion continuing, while Wong represents the faceless masses that disturb the General with their anonymity and unpredictability. Whereas the intended purpose of the meeting is professional, Forester finds himself responding to Wong on a social level, but is not sure where he stands with her as she is a famous Oriental poet, and thus not an ordinary citizen – nor an ordinary woman. Similarly, the initial encounter between Kire and Rahm at the beginning of *They Fly at Çiron* is also a class confrontation: it represents the first meeting between Myetra and one of its future conquests, but with a particularly ironic twist in that Kire's attempt to save Rahm from the 'attack' of the Winged One by using his powergun is an empty gesture, for the Myetrans will later destroy Rahm's village, while ultimately we learn that the Winged One had only flown down to try and help Rahm in his struggle with a puma.

As in the failed communication attempt between Forester and Wong, Delany again illustrates the misunderstanding and lack of empathy apparently endemic to human interaction. This is the first time that Rahm has ever seen a weapon – clearly the device is akin to a 'ray gun' of traditional space opera, but by using the signifier 'powergun', Delany introduces the concept via a different world view. It is ironic that, having just killed a puma, Rahm calls the weapon "a frightening thing" (1993:22). For Kire, the encounter with the "man and a beast" (1993:20) represents his first contact with a Çironian. When he asks Rahm if all members of his village go about peaceful, naked and weaponless, or if he himself is just 'simple-minded' (1993:23), it is clear that Delany is treading a delicate balance between lampooning the rural idyll of Çiron and upholding it as a model of societal perfection. Delany's point could also be that 'perfection' itself lapses into caricature.

Rahm does not understand the concept of a weapon, but explains he was able to kill the puma bare-handed as he is "stronger than any animal in this land" (1993:23), which implies that Çiron lives in harmony with nature instead of attempting to impose its own will on the world as Myetra does. Significantly, the mysterious Winged Ones living in the mountains at Hi-Vator represent the only thing the Çironians are afraid of, which hints at the innate prejudice and insularity of this idyllic society.

Interestingly, Rahm's fight with the puma can also be contrasted with the staged contest between Brass and Dragon at the beginning of *Babel-17*, the former being a Darwinian struggle of the fittest, and the latter a ritualised assimilation of antisocial tendencies. In his physical description of Rahm and Kire, Delany seems to equate the former with passion and spontaneity, and the latter with reason and intellect:

... the wide, brown face, the hair sweated in black blades to a cheek and a forehead still wrinkled with gasps from the fight. The eyes were molten amber – wet and hot.

(The lieutenant's eyes were a cool, startling green). (1993:21)

Delany begins chapter one with the brutality of Prince Nactor as symbolic of the predatory, destructive nature of Myetran society, while our first glimpse of Çiron in chapter two sees Naä and Rimgia discussing complex philosophical ideas – a stark contrast that raises the question of whether it is actually Myetra or Çiron that represents an ideal form of 'civilisation'. Described as having visited “dozens of lands” and having “learned the songs of people all over the world” (1993:33), the character of Naä is similar to Wong in that she is an artist articulating what is important and pertinent to her own society from its boundary or edge.

Rimgia says of the wandering singer: “... thou makest us, for the moments of thy song, soar like men and women with wings” (1993:33), which not only implies that Naä is a repository of experience and wisdom collected on her travels, but that she is also a communal fount of hope and imagination to be tapped by isolated villages such as Çiron in their understanding of, and potential interaction with, the larger world around them. In a sense she articulates the boundary separating Çiron from the rest of the world – a boundary that marks difference and opposition. The reference to winged people is significant as it seems to suggest that, while Çiron's fear of the creatures of Hi-Vator stems from a lack of knowledge about them, they literally look up to the Winged Ones as higher beings.

Rimgia asks Naä what happens after death, and she recounts the idea about the 'great consciousness' referred to earlier 'reading' the lives of the characters. The connection between writing and identity shows that Çiron is a literate society but, as the prose poem suggests, such written records and the history it represents are only as permanent as the scrolls they are inscribed upon. The 'single consciousness' also plays on the concept of logocentrism, which Baldick defines as “the desire for a centre or original guarantee of all meanings” (1990:125), which subverts the concept of *différance*.¹⁸

¹⁸ It may also refer to the Hindu-based concept that all consciousness is ultimately one.

The very identity of the ephemeral creatures known only as the Winged Ones arises from their contrast or relation to the Çironians, with neither culture able to define itself in isolation. It is clear Hi-Vator is a much more sophisticated society than Çiron: a matriarchy ruled by the Old Queen, and, with its own creation myth, it reverted back to a barter economy after having decided a monetary system did not meet its egalitarian needs.

Rahm's journey of discovery in Hi-Vator begins when he flees the destruction of his village by heading into the mountains, and rescues a Winged One trapped in a giant spider web in a cave. The web can be seen as the social matrix binding both Hi-Vator and Çiron through the medium of a common language with which they define their mutual reality. The scene recalls Wong 'thinking' in *Babel-17* in order to free herself from the restraining webbing by comprehending the totality of its pattern. Delany recomplicates this idea in *They Fly at Çiron*: the webbing also represents the constrained view of each other the two societies are caught up in. The meeting between Rahm and the Winged One becomes the symbolic interface between the two cultures, as well as representing the distinguishing differences comprising the boundary separating them.

Delany suggests that such a boundary is not necessarily divisive or restrictive, but can be seen as a fertile area of cross-pollination between the two cultures – a veritable seed bed of interaction and commingling. However, the encounter between Çiron and Myetra reveals the potential violence and disruption of such contact. But, on the other hand, these are themselves creative forces to be nurtured rather than repressed. At first Rahm is astonished when the captive creature addresses him in his own language, revealing his own innate social prejudice. Whereas *Babel-17* dealt with the intricacies and parameters of a fictitious language, *They Fly at Çiron* deals with the essential paradox of two different societies and species nevertheless sharing a common language.

This has profound implications for Mario Pei's contention that civilisation will only be perfected when language itself is rendered 'perfect'. With Çiron and Hi-Vator as control and experimental societies, Delany shows that 'civilisation' and 'language' are not objects that can be rendered perfect, but instead are dynamic and mutable processes generating boundaries to control and even subvert their interaction. Language is perhaps the defining sign of a sentient species, and socialised through their culture to comprehend the Winged Ones as animals, the Çironians had never thought them possessed of such a faculty.

The difference between Rahm and Vortcir is indicated by the fact that, even though they share a common language, the former is unable to understand certain words of the latter, including 'station' and 'ironic'. This may be taken to represent a

class difference between the two, but Delany deliberately confounds this initial boundary with Vortcir's musing that the Çironians are perhaps a "finer people" (1993:83) than the Winged Ones.

"Vortcir," Rahm said, as they walked, "my people go naked on the ground. Thy ... people go naked in the air. Both are easy with the land about them. We fight with our hands and our feet – and then only what attacks. We love our kind and are at peace with what lies about us. But ... this is not true of all creatures ..." (1993:81)

This is ironic as Rahm himself has human blood on his hands as earlier he had killed Mowkry in what Uk described as a fit of "absolute, enraged and blood-stopping evil" (1993:67), the intensity of which had chilled Uk. An added irony is that Rahm later uses Uk's exact phrasing when faced with a charging Myetran. The same words are used, but in a different context, which suggests that perception is relative and subservient to circumstance. The subsequent horror at his actions causes Rahm to flee into the mountains; but he realises that what he is trying to flee is within himself, namely the capacity for violence.

He tells Vortcir that he is no longer the same person he was before the incident, and doubts whether he will be able to return to Çiron because of what has been awakened within himself. This is akin to *Babel-17* when Wong's personality is subsumed by the alien language – she becomes a stranger to herself. What is important is that both these traumatic events precipitate journeys of discovery and quests for meaning and self-definition.

Rahm has crossed a boundary and, while he realises there is no return to his previous state, he still fails to understand that the only way for himself, Çiron and indeed Hi-Vator to survive such encounters is through assimilation – which is the secret of Myetra's successful colonisation campaign. Interestingly, the fact that Rahm had killed a man does not necessarily signify that Çiron is inherently primitive. Vortcir states that his people also commit murder, even though they know this to be wrong, but the perpetrator is always caught and punished.

The novel can be seen as an extended meditation on Çiron as exemplar of an ideal society in terms of social grouping and relation to the external world as mediated by the boundary of language, which is an osmotic interface allowing different ideas and concepts to filter through in order to both enrich and strengthen the society, as Naä's stories do. But Rahm's symbolic ascent to Hi-Vator introduces him to the notion that Çiron is far from perfect. Indeed, this ascent can even be seen to represent the Biblical story of the Tower of Babel since the knowledge Rahm gains is what changes his view of Çiron.

In his portrayal of the Winged Ones, Delany seems to offer another meditation on social harmony. Vortcir says his people's unique view of the world enabled them to see what atrocities were committed below in the name of civilisation. The Winged Ones practised "a policy of self-containment, helped on by a bit of mild, if mutual, hostility" (1993:79) in order to maintain the boundary between itself and the rest of the world. The association with traditional Christian angels is perhaps deliberate – they are higher beings watching over the world below, but choosing not to get involved in the grubby affairs of humanity. Delany adds a further complication by hinting that, perhaps, the Myetrans themselves are the perfect civilisation due to their ability to expand across elastic social boundaries by absorbing other cultures and societies. The disruption generated by this is a force of growth driving the engine of social change – change that will impact on both Myetra and Çiron.¹⁹

Delany's aim in bringing Rahm and Vortcir together as representatives of their respective societies is to illustrate the point that, however varied they may be, these societies are merely the sum of their differences. Rahm initially concludes that the Winged Ones are a people very like his own, but, "with their mysterious and mystic notions – money and God – these folk had again to seem wholly foreign" (1993:100). He finally comes to the realisation "that it was precisely those differences that made them a people" (1993:95).

Rahm raised his hand to finger the chain at his neck, that made him, at least honourably, some sort of personage among these incomprehensible creatures. What, he wondered, would he tell the Winged Ones who wanted to know what ideas were most central to his own, groundbound nest site? (1993:100)

The chain also symbolises the ties binding Rahm to his particular Çironian world view, while the question he articulates is at the crux of the novel's forward-looking reflection on Mario Pei. What is the interface between language and civilisation, between individual identity and social grouping? At what point can the boundary be drawn, and recrossed?

Delany cautions against the notion that society must naturally have a centre from which it can be defined and contained. Instead it is an intersecting web of flexible boundaries or interfaces that have to be mediated. To counter the logocentrism implicit in Rahm's 'journey of discovery', he introduces the character of Qualt, Çiron's garbage collector. His function renders him an outsider in terms of social standing, but at the same time gives him a unique insight from the perspective of the social boundary circumscribing his world-view. When Rahm befriends a

¹⁹ 'Perfection' depends on the criteria used: is it communalistic contentment, or the ability to grow and survive?

Winged One who itself is an outsider, Delany intersects the 'main' text with a marginal viewpoint. This provides a different, but equally valid, perspective on both societies – and through these alternative viewpoints an image of the total society is arrived at. In other words, a holistic overview – or a bird's-eye view – is gained of both societies. Brenda Marshall comments that

A critique of logocentrism, then, must include a rigorous examination of language because within the logocentrism of our Western tradition language provides the mediating system through which thought (or meaning) is physically manifested. (1992:21)

Although Rahm and Vortcir speak the same language, there are subtle and fundamental differences. The latter notes that, while both share the same word for 'star', the Winged Ones "had no single word for 'ear', but more than ten for its various parts and functions" (1993:88). That the Çironians have no word for 'powergun', and thus do not understand the concept of a weapon, precludes their fate at the hands of the colonising Myetrans, showing how important language is in comprehending external reality. This is not to suggest, though, that language creates reality, as per the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, which has been generally discredited in linguistic circles.²⁰ It merely indicates that a correlative link can be made between language and social reality in how the former is used to explicate and construct the latter.

By contrasting Rahm and Qualt, and Çiron and Hi-Vator, Delany also explicates the structuralist concept of binary opposition as conveyed in the terms signifier and signified. Binary logic "is based on the primary distinction between identity and difference", and "we come to think of our social and cultural world as a series of sign systems, comparable with languages" (Marshall 1992:43). In language, "the perception of identity is the same as the perception of difference; thus every linguistic perception holds in its mind at the same time an awareness of its own opposite" (1992:44).

This is a key concept in the type of structuralism that Delany exemplifies in both *Babel -17* and *They Fly at Çiron*. He draws on two distinct strands: on the one hand, he is particularly interested in Saussure's semiology based on his classic delineation of the sign into a signifier in written or spoken form, and the signified or meaning. On the other hand, he also draws on the 'structural anthropology of Levi-

²⁰ Walter Meyers explains that "the central question of linguistic relativity is this: does our perception of reality constrain our language, or does our language constrain our perception of reality?" This principle of linguistic relativity is the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (1980:159–160).

Strauss, which states that “individual elements have meaning only in so far they are part of an overall system” (Jefferson 1986:93).

The crux of structuralism is the belief that culture is akin to language, as it also contains signs organised in a similar fashion. It is important to realize that structuralism is not a school or a doctrine, but “a generalised revolution in ways of thinking” (Jefferson 1986:94). What Delany does in both *Babel-17* and *They Fly at Çiron* is to apply this revolutionary ‘way of thinking’ to SF, which has its own unique and flexible signification system. Barthes defines structuralism as the reconstruction of an object “in such a way as to manifest the rules of functioning” of this object (1986:303). An example of this is analysing cultural artefacts by means of contemporary linguistics. Delany does this in a retrospective fashion by focusing, in turn, on the ‘artefacts’ or signifieds of SF itself, and thereby adding a further cultural or societal dimension to their traditional valence within the genre.

SF is a particular application of language, and Delany’s primary focus is on the functioning and properties of language itself. In *Babel-17* he articulates this concern by having a heroine embark on a quest to comprehend the alien language of an invading species, but ultimately she has to confront the nature of her own self-identity. Instead of *Babel-17* being the ‘perfect’ language, which Mario Pei contends would axiomatically result in a ‘perfect’ civilisation, Wong’s interaction with the enigmatic Butcher leads to the birth of *Babel-18* – in essence, she re-enacts the story of the fall of the Tower of Babel.

In *They Fly at Çiron*, Delany examines the same problematic interface between language and civilisation by depicting three distinct societies, each claiming to be exemplars of perfection, and how their different applications of language impact on their relationships with each other. Çiron is an Edenic rural idyll but, with no concept of weapons or war in its language, it is easy prey for the colonising Myetras. Without any sense of such sophisticated concepts as religion or money, Çiron is described as not being civilised enough to be taken seriously – but it is a society that lives in harmony with nature and itself, even if this introspective isolation is the cause of its downfall.

Disturbingly, Myetra claims to be the superior civilisation due to its ability to expand and absorb other cultures (and, of course, due to its superior technology). The social boundary separating Myetra from other cultures is not a passive delineation, but is seen as a zone of violent, if generative, conflict and chaos fuelling the social engine driving change and adaptation, and thus the cyclical nature of history. Kire asks Naä:

“Do you know anything about Myetra, singer? It’s a pleasant place – but there are too many people in it. There is not enough food – and above all not enough land for all our people. You see us now taking lives, breaking apart cultures

and traditions But soon what you will see, in a band from water to water, is the growth of a rich, intelligent, and wonderfully hardworking and resourceful people, taking land, making food, imparting their ways and wonders on these myriad backwards folk who have no notion of their own histories ...". (Delany 1993:135–136)

Whereas Delany uses the fictitious decentred language of *Babel-17* to expound on the anti-humanism implicit in structuralism, he tackles the concept of binary opposition in *They Fly at Çiron*, together with the basic structuralist tenet that meaning only exists in difference or opposition. This plurality of meaning in the language/civilisation debate also indicates Delany's move towards post-structuralism for its added flexibility and ambiguity in dealing with such complex issues. Jefferson notes that "the primacy of the system over what it represents is a conclusion that poetics derives from the extension of the Saussurean model" (1986:106). Structuralism is ultimately concerned with the way in which meaning is produced, and sees language as a self-sufficient system not predetermined by the intentions of its speakers. But herein lies a central dilemma, as articulated by Marshall:

Such an emphasis begins to free meaning from absolute representation and to move it toward the postmodern notion of meaning as constructed. Individual experience is understood in social terms. But the structuralist paradigm closes this movement down just as it opens it up, by referring to social actions as a system of norms. Thus, the absoluteness of one-to-one representation is replaced by the absoluteness of rules and mechanisms (for Saussure, the rules of a language). It remains for poststructuralist theory to historicise these rules, and thus, to break open the closed structural system. This move by poststructuralism, however, would have been unthinkable without structuralism's rupture of meaning, from pure essence to social construction. (1992:30)

There are several noticeable instances in both novels where Delany engages in such a 'rupture of meaning'. One is the notion in *Babel-17* of language as a mirror reflecting reality, as opposed to being a transparent medium through which some ultimate form of reality can be glimpsed. Another is the notion of society as a tangled web of interrelationships lacking a definable centre point, a web whose entanglements can be negotiated and untied by language, in the same way Wong 'sees' the weaknesses of the binding holding her captive by thinking in *Babel-17*.

Another more amorphous notion in both novels is that any form of societal disruption or intrusion, such as invasion or colonisation, becomes an interface for contact that is as potentially stimulating as it is initially destructive. In *Babel-17*, Wong 'ends' the ruinous invasion by redefining its terms of reference in the alien language, and thus nullifying the very definitions that had upheld the mutual

aggression for so long. In *They Fly at Çiron*, we learn that the goal of Myetra is to forge a vast communal society sharing its strength and wisdom by assimilating lesser 'backward' societies like Çiron. Such colonising practices do have ethical implications, but Myetra is of the opinion that its actions are justified and in the best interests of all concerned as it serves its own greater good, which is seen to be the greater good for everybody (this is typical of colonizing nations' self-justification).

Perhaps the most slippery signifier of all is the Winged Ones, those graceful creatures who watch the folly of humanity from their mountain-top society, and who seem to suggest for Delany a state of physical and societal perfection only hinted at through language. In *Babel-17*, the gender and sexual/political issues to dominate such later novels as *Triton* (1976) are still dormant, though the notion of a 'triple' foreshadows *Dhalgren* (1977). The cosmetisurgery that Forester undergoes to differentiate himself as a person inhabiting the social margin of Wong's spaceship crew is given full expression in the Winged Ones, who are not only radically different in physical form but, more importantly, seem androgynous. By negating sexual differences through androgyny, Delany presents the Winged Ones as a truly egalitarian species.

... these were a people among whom the women's furry breasts were scarcely larger than the men's, and that the men's genitals were almost as internal as the women's. The distinction between the sexes was only minimally evident ... (Delany 1993:86)

The use of the words 'margin', 'rim' and 'edge' in close proximity underlines the status of the Winged Ones as a peripheral society. It is interesting to note that, while these creatures appear androgynous, they are fully sexual. Kire recounts in an appendix forming a marginal addition to the novel itself of how a group of Winged Ones submitted him to a "game of desire" after they had "just vanquished the whole of a Myetran brigade" (1993:219). That he feared the Winged Ones in this bizarre erotic encounter is ironic because these creatures were next on the Myetrans' list of conquests. The only hint of intimacy in *Babel-17* occurs when Delany describes Wong as entering the Butcher's mind "in some bewildering, reversed sexuality" (1966:144). Delany suggests that sex, like language, is a boundary or interface of communication between people. This idea will be explored more fully in the next chapter.

Chapter Two

The Anatomy of Difference

At the end of *They Fly at Çiron*, Delany subverts the traditional notion of a novel's ending or conclusion by adding on several shorter pieces that reflect on, or expand, the themes in the novella.¹ One of these, 'Return to Çiron', concerns Kire's account to a Calvicon historian about "something unmentioned" (Delany 1993:217), a sexual game of desire that a group of Winged Ones asks him to join. This is just after the pall of battle has passed, with Kire's life having been saved by Rahm. He is wandering dazed around the camp, which is littered with the corpses of the fallen, and tainted with the smoke of pillage.

The Winged Ones' exhortation to the 'groundling' to "play a game" (1993:219) seems jarringly out of place. That the game itself is sexual seems equally bizarre in the circumstances.² Kire is afraid of the Winged Ones as "they'd just vanquished the whole of a Myetran brigade" (1993:219), and so is understandably hesitant to go against their wishes. He recounts how he is borne aloft on the back of a Winged One, accompanied by two others, and is transferred between them in the air.

"We play the game of desire, along the chain of desire ... We tangle the chain in our play!" One piece and another, my clothes came away ...

The three of them at me, shook me and pleased me, bit at me – ...

Do you understand? Moments before, I had been by a dying man ...

But now, with these three lovers upon me, my bodily perceptions were cajoled, caressed, excited to a pitch, an altitude, where language could not follow ... As I floated and flowed and soared above words, listening to their mewings and scrittings, I let a sound that was wholly animal ... (1993:221)

Both *Babel-17* and *They Fly at Çiron* are about the primacy of language, and yet Delany ends the latter with an account that is peripheral to the main narrative, but which overshadows it with its disturbing intimations of experience beyond language, of language's failure to articulate feeling or reason. The game of desire that Kire takes part in portrays sex as an interface for communication, but the 'chain of desire' that binds them together is also a complex set of power relations that uses the body itself

¹ Derrida refers to a *parergon* or "supplement outside the work" (1982:55) as something that extends the boundaries of the traditional novel. It defers the anticipated ending, and subverts the notion of closure.

² This 'game of desire' also subverts the notion of the Winged Ones conveyed in the novella – and the fact that this happens beyond the boundary of the traditional closure point, namely the 'ending', is even more subversive. The Winged Ones' androgyny has the corollary of making them appear to be asexual, or uninterested in matters of the flesh. Portrayed as 'higher' creatures, as symbolised by their mountain-top home, the fact that they even feel desire makes them appear more human – and more alien at the same time.

as a site of discourse, and a locus of identity. McNay explains the 'cultural significance' of the body:

... it is impossible to know the materiality of the body outside of its cultural signification. The psychic impulses and drives of the body may form the threshold of sexual identity, but these drives are not pre-social, rather they are always already produced within the signifying network of gender. Since the body cannot be known in its unadorned essence, sexual liberation cannot be ... sexuality without power relations. ... Once we accept that desire and power are indissolubly linked, that sexuality gains its shape from historically specific power relations, then we can begin to imagine new forms of desire which are not hampered by the myth of a state of powerlessness. (1992:30)

This chapter will focus on Delany's interest in power relations and sexual identity, using the materiality of the body as a point of focus and contestation. I will look at two novels: the first, *Triton* (1976), is an SF novel about an idyllic utopia where not only every nuance of sexual orientation can be fulfilled, but is categorised and thus normalised. The main protagonist is Bron Helstrom, and the central theme is his quest for self-identity – or to fix an identity with which he is happy – which leads to a change of gender at the end of the novel. By constructing an artificial society, Delany is able to reveal how social institutions and practices are codified, and their impact upon power relations, with the body as a site of struggle and intersecting discourses as exemplified by Helstrom's quest.

I will also look briefly at *The Mad Man* in order to highlight complementary themes and issues, and the different ways in which Delany approaches them (*The Mad Man* is discussed again in Chapter Five). In his 'Disclaimer' Delany describes his novel as "a pornotopic fantasy" (1994b:xiii). It is a thriller about graduate student John Marr's research into the life and work of philosopher Timothy Hasler, a quest that plunges him into the shadowy realm of marginal gay sexual practices in post-AIDS New York. Marr's ostensible aim is to attempt to understand who Hasler was, but the more he finds out, the more it throws his own self-identity into question, until the boundary between his research and his own life is crossed.

I link between these two seemingly disparate novels via the work of Michel Foucault, who states that sexuality is "an especially dense transfer point for relations of power". Foucault's example "in resisting the naturalising assumptions that undergird normative sexual behaviours" (Bristow 1997:170) has led to modern theoretical discourses such as 'queer theory':³

³ David Gauntlett defines queer theory as "a set of ideas based around the idea that identities are not fixed and do not determine who we are. It suggests that it is meaningless to talk in general about 'women' or any other group, as identities consist of so many elements that to assume that people can be

There is no doubt that Foucault's significance for queer theory lies in the particular emphasis he puts on the discursive construction of eroticism, especially how and why desire has been damagingly constrained by the ways in which we have come to talk and think about a late nineteenth-century word, sexuality, particularly in its limited dualistic 'homo-' and 'hetero-' forms. (Bristow 1997:170)

By 'queer theory' I do not wish to oversimplify my position by seeming to indicate that these novels are reconstructionist visions of socio-sexual activism. Homo- and hetero- forms of sexuality should not be taken to mean a simple binary opposition, as I wish to show that Delany's main concern is "the cultural management of differences between men and women, between generations, and between classes" by examining "how and why eroticism is bound into structures of inequality" (1997:172).

James Miller cites Foucault as arguing that the term 'gay' has become obsolete due to the transformation of our understanding of the concept of sexuality: "We see the extent to which our pursuit of pleasure has been limited in large part by a vocabulary foisted upon us" (1993:254). Foucault goes on to point out that there is "an infinite range of what we call sexual behaviour" (quoted in Miller 1993:254). Delany is concerned with sexuality as the expression of an overarching institutionalised normative structure, and the various strategies and expressions that people adopt in resistance and subversion of this structure – which, at the same time, maintains and extends that structure.

The novels have different structures. *Triton* depicts a fictitious liberal society where there is much sexual freedom but endless classification, while *The Mad Man* is about how an individual challenges society through the peripheral practices of a sexual subgroup. I think Delany's aim is identical in both novels: to explicate power relations in terms of how they function, and are engendered. The concept of sex goes far beyond such classifications as 'homo-' or 'hetero-'; it is a complex interface between the individual and his or her society, and is one of the primary means by which such an individual mediates him- or herself in terms of that society.

This leads back to the concept of power relations, and how these are mediated between individuals in a social and institutional context, and how this struggle is inscribed upon the battlefield of the body itself. Barry Smart states that Foucault's work is aimed at interpreting the human condition in a way "that effectively revealed,

beneath surface appearances, conflicts of interest and power at the level of the social formation, the individual psyche, and humanity in general” (1985:14).

A main theme of this *pouvoir-savoir* – which, as Merquior notes, is the original French term for power-knowledge relations (1991:108), has been “the historical inscription of relations of power-knowledge upon the body”. This is combined “with the forms, modalities, practices and ‘techniques of self’ through which ‘the individual is constituted and becomes conscious of himself as a subject’”. Smart notes that locating the body as a central locus in the operation of power relations reveals the body to be located “in a political field invested with power relations which render it docile and productive, and thus politically and economically useful”:

This political technology of the body – the calculations, organisations, and techniques linking power relations, knowledge and the body – has no specific institutional locus although institutions use it or employ certain of its methods. In consequence the analysis of relations of power, knowledge and the body is not situated at the level of social institutions, rather the focus is upon the diffusion of particular technologies of power and their inter-relationship with the emergence of particular forms of knowledge, notably those sciences which have human beings, the individual, as their object. (Smart 1985:77)

McHoul and Grace agree, and state that “political practice therefore cannot be separated from the fundamental philosophical question of ‘being’ or ‘subjectivity’” (1993:57), noting that, for Foucault, “the question of subjectivity, and the political struggles associated with ‘identities’ constitutes the most important issues of our time”. Foucault states that,

in a society such as ours, but basically in any society, there are manifold relations of power which permeate, characterise and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse. There can be no possible exercise of power without a certain economy of discourses of truth which operates through and on the basis of this association. We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth. (quoted in McHoul and Grace 1993:59)⁴

⁴ Discourse is an important concept for Delany: “Discourses are plural and are learned, with language, where they function as a particular economic level in the linguistic array. They are not a set of criteria that are to be met or missed by a text. Rather, they lodge inchoately in the processes by which we make a text make sense They are revisable, often within themselves. The maintenance of a discourse, like the revision of a discourse, always involves some violent rhetorical shift – though the final effects of that violence may well be in some wholly unexpected area of understanding that the discourse effects” (1999:8). In other words, discourse permeates a text. The ‘violent rhetorical shift’ that Delany refers to is the process of dislocation in action, which is an operating parameter of discourse.

Foucault poses two main questions about power: how, and by what means, is it exercised?; and what is the impact or outcome of the exercise of power? He states that “power is not conceived as a property or possession of a dominant class, state or sovereign but as a strategy” (quoted in Smart 1985:77).

... the effects of domination associated with power arises not from an appropriation and deployment by a subject but from ‘manoeuvres, tactics, techniques, functionings’: and a relation of power does not constitute an obligation or prohibition imposed upon the ‘powerless’, rather it invests them, is transmitted by and through them. (quoted in Smart 1985:77)

Foucault argues that power is ‘omnipresent’ (Merquior 1991:111), as well as being anonymous and comprehensive: “It makes cogs in its machinery of us all, high and low, ruling and ruled” (quoted in Merquior 1991:114). Commenting on the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault explains that his aim was to “highlight the discourse of sex in relation to ‘polymorphous techniques of power’”:

Sex was [no longer] something one simply judged; it was a thing one administered’. Since the dawn of the industrial age, Western civilisation colonised our biology: it devised an ‘anatomopolitics’ – the planning of the population. Human sciences such as psychology, medicine and demography seized on the ‘confessed’ body as an object of social concern and governmental manipulation. Once more, a crucial alliance between power and knowledge was struck. (quoted in Merquior 1991:121)

Foucault defines “sexuality” as an “historically constructed apparatus”, with the “disciplines of the body and the regulations of the population” forming the two axes about which “the organisation of power over life” revolved. The discourse of sex came about mostly as a

technology of the self wielded by the bourgeois sculpting his own image. The bourgeoisie built a code of sex for its own self-assertion. It erected the heterosexual monogamous couple into the standard of morality and pillar of society. Every other form of sex came to be regarded as contrary to nature and dangerous to society. (quoted in McHoul and Grace 1993:123)

The main site of this mediation and interface, the locus of resistance and expression of sexuality, is the human body. Turner explains that, “in modern societies, power has a specific focus, namely the body, which is the product of political/power relationships” (1984:34). As an object of power, the body is produced so as to be “controlled, identified and reproduced” (1984:34). Foucault referred to ‘anatomopolitics’ as the disciplines of the body, while ‘biopolitics’ concerns populations (quoted in Turner 1984:34). I will argue that the SF format gives Delany

a unique opportunity to explore this theme by extrapolating a future society with all its attendant institutions and social apparatus, placing his main protagonist in the midst of this society, and revealing the interaction between the individual body and the collective societal body. In *Babel-17* and *They Fly at Çiron*, the focus was on the interface between language and society, while in these two novels the interface is between the corporeal individual and a discorporeal society.

The Mad Man complements *Triton* in that it concerns a specific social set-up – in this instance, the gay S&M subculture – and how an individual from outside this society is assimilated into it. The difference here is that the social set-up is a given, as it is based on reality, with Delany aiming to reveal the body as a point of convergence for power relations. We not only inhabit society, but society is an integral component of our own make-up. Delany focuses on sex in both novels – Helstrom is a former prostitute, and Hasler becomes initiated into ‘deviant’ sex – as sex and power relations are closely related. Foucault argues that “rather being the natural origin of desires, sex is in fact a cultural construct that is produced with the aim of social regulation and the control of sexuality” (McNay 1992:28).

The construct of ‘natural sex’ performs a certain number of regulatory functions: firstly, it makes it possible to group together in an ‘artificial unity’ a number of disparate and unrelated biological functions and bodily pleasures; secondly, by unifying these disparate pleasures, it bolsters a regulatory notion of a ‘natural’ heterosexuality; finally, the notion of sex inverts the representation of the relationship of power to sexuality, so that, rather than seeing sexuality as a phenomenon produced and constructed through the exercise of power relations, it is seen as an unruly force which power can only attempt to repress and control. (1992:29)

Foucault comments that “we have witnessed a visible explosion of unorthodox sexualities” (1978:49). Lois McNay notes that the notion of sex as a regulatory construct “disrupts binary distinctions between the natural and the cultural contained in the sex/gender distinction” (1992:29–30). By this she means that gender is not only the name attributed to a pre-given sex, but is also the means by which sexes are produced and established (1992:30).

As Kathryn Woodward notes, “the body offers potential boundaries to the self and presents both the uniqueness of each individual and a site for the marking of difference” (1997:65). This leads her to the concept of embodiment, described as “a common concern with how the bodily bases of people’s actions and interactions are socially structured in different ways” (1997:65). Woodward argues that, in order to comprehend embodiment, a person needs to understand how our corporeality is shaped by social and natural processes.

This means we need to understand the body not only in terms of biology and how it functions to keep us alive, but how “it shapes our identities and structures our interventions in, and classifications of, the world” (1997:65). The concept of ‘identity’ is critical to such an understanding, for “the physical body is one site which might both set out the boundaries of who we are and provide the basis of identity – for example, sexual identity” (1997:13). If sexuality is one aspect of identity, then identity is obviously a crucial starting-point for social differentiation and classification. As Woodward notes:

... the concept of identity raises fundamental questions about how individuals fit into the community and the social world and how identity can be seen as the interface between subjective positions and cultural situations. Identity gives us an idea of who we are and of how we relate to others and to the world in which we live. Identity marks the ways in which we are the same as others who share that position, and the ways in which we are different from those who do not. Often, identity is most clearly defined by difference, that is by what it is not. Identities may be marked by polarisation, for example ... by the marking of inclusion or exclusion – insiders and outsiders, ‘us’ and ‘them’. Identities are frequently constructed in terms of oppositions such as man/woman, black/white, straight/gay, healthy/unhealthy, normal/deviant. (1997:1–2)

Woodward goes on to explain that identities are “produced, consumed and regulated within culture”, and the ‘identity positions’ that are assigned to us, or projected by us, are rendered meaningful through symbolic systems of representation, including language and visual images:

Representation includes the signifying practices and symbolic systems through which meanings are produced and which position us as subjects. Representations produce meanings through which we can make sense of our experience and of who we are. We could go further and suggest that these symbolic systems create the possibilities of what we are and what we can become. Representation as a cultural process establishes individual and collective identities and symbolic systems provide possible answers to the questions: who am I?; what could I be?; who I do want to be? (1997:15)

This raises interesting questions about the process of identification – of who does the identifying, and how identities become fixed. Is identity immutable, or fluid? And is there such a thing as a ‘true’ or ‘essential’ identity? Woodward questions if the assertion of identity refers to “some essential quality”, either by establishing that this is inherent in a person, or by pinpointing its “authentic source in history?” (1997:39). This refers to another aspect of identity, namely gender, and whether this is biologically predetermined or socially inculcated. The implication of this, states

Woodward, is that the very articulation of identity has become contested, because the site on which all this is focused – the body – is a battleground for the “marking of difference” (1997:29). Difference is perpetuated through the very symbolic systems referred to earlier. Woodward argues that:

... ideas about separating, purifying, demarcating and punishing transgressions have as their main function to impose system on an inherently untidy experience. It is only by exaggerating the difference between, within and without, above and below, male and female, for and against that a semblance of order is created. (1997:33)

Paradoxically, the social order is maintained through binary oppositions, as things exist in relation to each other, and only find meaning and definition through such relation. But the relation is not nearly so simple or even obvious, as in terms of gender and identity issues, where one set of terms is weighted against the other and underpins social divisions as well. This returns us to language as a classificatory system that mediates power relations in society:

... binary oppositions – the most extreme form of marking difference – are essential to the production of meaning ... Difference can be constructed negatively as the exclusion and marginalisation of those who are defined as ‘other’ by outsiders ... On the other hand, it can be celebrated as a source of diversity, heterogeneity and hybridity, where the recognition of change and difference is seen as enriching ... (Woodward 1997:35)⁵

It is in this complex context of power relations, identity, gender and the quest for political and social utopia that I will examine *Triton* and *The Mad Man* as contrasting, and yet complementary, discourses on alternative forms of sexuality – the former legitimised through the conventions and tropes of SF as an imagined utopia; and the latter legitimised by being a realistic novel about marginal gay sexual practices in a contemporary urban setting. Both discourses articulate different structures of power and knowledge relations, which are not nearly as straightforward as indicated by the above statement.

Triton deals with the marginal underbelly or social intersections of the utopia it constructs, while Delany refutes his apparent ‘mode’ of realism in *The Mad Man* by introducing the novel with a ‘disclaimer’ stressing its non-realism, and interjecting descriptions of a fantastical winged and horned beast stalking the Hudson River in Central Park, New York, which have the effect of making the novel seem more of a

⁵ In line with Woodward’s argument, I cannot over-emphasise the importance of the idea that dislocation is *not* a negative concept, but, through disruption and eruption, is a powerful agent of meaningful change.

fantasy than *Triton* ostensibly is. Through such recomplication, Delany attempts to illustrate the fluidity and complexity of the social systems underpinning his discourses, and how multivalent power and knowledge relations become when they are institutionalised to the point of constructing the very fabric of society, which becomes an illusory and shifting background against which issues of gender and genre are examined.

Marc Zaldívar notes that, with *Triton*, “Delany consciously enters the history of discourse surrounding the utopian/dystopian polemic” (1999), with Russell Blackford commenting that the novel “is an experiment in radical utopian narrative” (1996:142).⁶ But what exactly is meant by utopia? Zaldívar lists the following questions that are raised by the term: What does it imply to have an ideal society? Does this imply ideal citizens? What assumptions and limitations do an author, and the reader, contend with in modelling an ideal? Darko Suvin explicates Thomas More’s original use of the term ‘utopia’ (1979:37):

Utopias operate by example and demonstration, dialectically. At the basis of all utopian debates, in its open or hidden dialogues, is a gesture of pointing, a wide-eyed glance from here to there, a “travelling shot” moving from the author’s everyday lookout to the wondrous panorama of a far-off land. (Suvin 1979:37)

The book’s first subtitle, ‘An Ambiguous Heterotopia’, was coined between the first and third drafts, and was intended to “exaggerate a textual dialogue” with *The Dispossessed* by Ursula K Le Guin, itself subtitled ‘An Ambiguous Utopia’ (Zaldívar 1999). Delany himself states that his “added subtitle was an attempt to put the two novels clearly into a dialogue I already felt was implied” (Philmus 1990:301). In the same interview, Delany refers to the medical definition of heterotopia as “the removal of one part or organ from the body and affixing it at another place in or on the body” (1990:301), such as a skin graft or sex change – with a sex-change operation itself being a critical turning point at the end of the book. But the most important definition of ‘heterotopia’ is that of Foucault in the preface to *The Order of Things* – a definition which Delany quotes as a frontispiece to the second appendix of *Triton*, virtually at the end of the novel:⁷

⁶ In 1996, Wesleyan University Press in the US reissued the 1976 Bantam Spectra edition under its original title, *Trouble on Triton*, which, unlike the bland and non-committal original signifier, immediately introduces a dystopic element.

⁷ Walter Meyers comments that “whether Foucault’s influence was good for Delany’s art is doubtful: George Steiner says *The Order of Things* produces, on first reading, “an almost intolerable sense of verbosity, arrogance, and obscure platitude”, and his was one of the kinder reviews. Similarly, *Triton*’s reviewers in the science-fiction magazines found little to praise in the novel” (1980:183).

Utopias afford consolation: although they have no real locality there is nevertheless a fantastic, untroubled region in which they are able to unfold; they open up cities with vast avenues, superbly planted gardens, countries where life is easy, even though the road to them is chimerical. Heterotopias are disturbing, probably because they secretly undermine language, because they make it impossible to name this and that, because they shatter or tangle common names, because they destroy 'syntax' in advance, and not only the syntax with which we construct sentences but also that less apparent syntax which causes words and things (next to and also opposite one another) to 'hold together'. This is why utopias permit fables and discourse: they run with the very grain of language and are part of the fundamental dimension of the fabula: heterotopias ... desiccate speech, stop words in their tracks, contest the very possibility of grammar at its source; they dissolve our myths and sterilise the lyricism of our sentences. (Foucault 1970:xviii)

Part one of the novel, 'Trouble on Triton, or Der Satz', is prefaced by Willard Van Orman Quine's statement in *Word and Object* that "no two of us learn our language alike, nor, in a sense, does any finish learning it while he lives" (1976:1).⁸ Delany refers to language as "a stabilising mechanism" in *The Mad Man*, with the world itself made from language – "i.e., that it is constituted by the structure of its stabilising forces" (1994b:67–68). With language as the main stabilising force in society, a heterotopia can be seen as revealing the world as a constructed object, and to challenge that construct at its most fundamental level – that of language. How these stabilising forces are structured in terms of power and knowledge relations in the heterotopia that is Triton is a main concern of the novel. The quotation from *Natural Symbols* by Mary Douglas that prefaces the whole novel is a reflection of the Foucauldian discourse on power and knowledge relations in terms of the locus of the human/social body:

The social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived. The physical experience of the body, always modified by the social categories through which it is known, sustains a particular view of society. There is a continual exchange of meaning between the two kinds of bodily experience so that each reinforces the categories of the other. (Delany 1976: preface)⁹

Delany contends that SF is not about the future, but is in dialogue with the present: "It works by setting up a dialogue with the here-and-now, a dialogue as intricate and rich as the writer can make it" (Philmus 1990:320). He also remarks that

⁸ Walter Meyers comments that *Triton* is "a storehouse of linguistic themes", with the main focus being semantics. Each of the seven chapters is headed by a quotation by a notable linguistic philosopher (1980:183).

⁹ One could quite easily conclude that *Triton* focuses on the 'social' body at the expense of the 'physical' body. There is little, if any, of the graphic content that characterises *The Mad Man*, for example.

SF is “fundamentally different from utopian thinking”, and that “to force SF into utopian templates is a largely unproductive strategy”, as “utopia presupposes a pretty static, unchanging, and rather tyrannical world” (1990:320). Referring to this notion of a dialogue with the present – that is, extrapolating from current trends and institutions – Kathy Acker remarks in the foreword to the Wesleyan University Press edition of *Triton* that, “in 1976 Delany, magician, was prophesying or creating the San Francisco of 1996” (1996:xi).

In other words, the heterotopia that is *Triton* is, in effect, a discursive space in which contemporary notions about power and knowledge relations with regard to the body and its identity, and the accompanying social structures, are extended into a fictive realm in order to map out their consequences. It is also about the contestation and assertion of identity, and articulates questions about what constitutes identity, and how identity is mediated in a social context. This makes for a complex, interrelated debate about the link between representation and identity, as Woodward notes:

Questions can be raised about the power of representation and how and why some meanings are preferred. All signifying practices that produce meaning involve relations of power, including the power to define who is included and who is excluded. Culture shapes identity through giving meaning to experience, making it possible to opt for one mode of subjectivity ... However, we are constrained, not only by the range of possibilities which culture offers – that is, by the variety of symbolic representations – but also by social relations. (1997:15)

Jonathan Rutherford contends that identity is the intersection of social, cultural and economic relations, and that it represents the conjuncture “of our everyday lives with the economic and political relations of subordination and domination” (Woodward 1997:15). This debate is complicated further when one considers that Delany is also writing from a poststructuralist stance. As Zaldivar notes, “Delany proves himself to be firmly in the post-structuralist debate as he questions simultaneously the limits and margins of a social system and the idea of a centred structure around which the social system operates” (1999). Derrida makes the following point about centred structure:

No doubt that by orienting and organising the coherence of the system, the centre of a structure permits the free play of its elements inside the total form. And even today the notion of a structure lacking any centre represents the unthinkable. Nevertheless, the centre also closes off the free play it opens up and makes possible. (Zaldivar 1999)

This creates “a seemingly contradictory, definitely paradoxical, relationship between a centre and the free play of the elements within the larger structure” (1999).

It also implies a fruitful arena for identity contestation and articulation, for “social systems offer new ways of making sense of the experience of social divisions and inequalities and the means whereby some groups are excluded and stigmatised” (Woodward 1997:15). Delany articulates a similar idea in *The Mad Man*:

... large-scale, messy, informal systems are necessary in order to develop, on top of them, precise, hard-edged, tractable systems – or, more accurately, structures that are so informal that it is questionable whether they can be called systematic at all are prerequisites for those structures that can, indeed, be recognised as systems in the first place. (1994b:243)

This raises questions about how identity is institutionalised, and how certain identities come to enjoy primacy over others, which are marginalised. This complex debate about society and its social mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion takes place on a heterotopic level in *Triton* “from within and without of the textual boundaries”, meaning that *Triton* is “a hard novel to name” as it repeatedly questions “the problem of naming, and therefore centring” (Zaldivar 1999). By applying the ‘name’ of heterotopia within SF boundaries – and yet integrating disparate genres such as the romance novel and sociological exposition – Delany’s text opens up possibilities beyond its simplistic SF labelling.

Robert Philmus remarks that the “utopian possibilities of Triton’s social dimension, or the whole dimension of the book that goes along with utopia, seem to be decentred, to be in the background” (1990:305). This is because everything we see and learn about the world of Triton is mediated through the character of Bron Helstrom, whose thought on the very first page of whether or not he is “a reasonably happy man” forms the basis of his quest for identity and meaning that underpins the novel – both in terms of self-identity, and for how identity itself functions and is constituted.¹⁰ The only external viewpoint is offered by the two appendices, with Delany himself commenting that he “wanted to leave the suggestion that there is a political side to these problems that the rest of the narrative – at least as it’s been told from Bron’s point of view – has up till now repressed or been blind to” (Philmus 1990:302).

Delany refers to the four modernist world views expressed by WH Auden: New Jerusalem is “the technological super-city where everything is bright and shiny and clean”; Brave New World is where “everything is regimented and standardized”; Arcadia is “that wonderful place where everyone eats natural foods and no machine larger than one person can fix in an hour is allowed in”; and the Land of Flies is

¹⁰ It is interesting to compare this to General Forester’s thought at the opening of *Babel-17*: “What is this animal man?” (1966:6).

where “fire and flood and earthquake – as well as famine and disease – are always shattering the quality of life” (1990:303).

SF can be perceived as “a concert of these four images: all four, either through their presence or absence, always spoke from every SF text” – and it is this interplay that complicates the utopian/dystopian dialectic and prevents it from being a simplistic binary split or schism. Delany extends Auden’s argument by stating that postmodernism has added a further two images: the “techno-chaos” of Junk City, with the “country landscape polluted with technological detritus” as the “corresponding rural image” (1990:304).

Delany implies that dystopia is intrinsically inherent in utopia – with both social conditions being different sides of the same coin. All four of these images are inherent in *Triton*, which marks the applicability of the ‘heterotopia’ label. Zaldivar argues that “it is the compilation of these paradoxically different societies being blended into one model that makes *Triton* such an intricate work ... [Delany] refuses to let the reader, or even his main character, settle on any sort of fixed meaning” (1999).

This is precisely because meaning is not, and cannot be, fixed – particularly in a social system, which is a compact between individuals. What is crucial, argues Delany, is the seemingly invisible process whereby meaning appears to become fixed – that is, how a social system is eventually over-determined. Zaldivar states that “perspective is always in play” (1999) and, as Derrida argues:

In the absence of a centre or origin – everything became a system where the central signified is never absolutely present outside a system of difference. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the interplay of signification ad infinitum. (Zaldivar 1999)

Zaldivar argues that Bron refuses to accept the system of difference that underpins *Triton*’s social structure, which functions by means of a “fundamental internal contradiction”:

There is no centre, except those that are created momentarily by the free play of the elements of the system. Most accept this and create momentary centres, as they should do. Bron, however, wants to escape the system and become an ‘individual’. He cannot accept his position of being implicated in the game of difference. This is the source of his anxiety. He wants his meaning to be the transcendental meaning – the timeless, true meaning – and the quest for it drives him to madness. (1999)

Madness as a part of creative and destructive impulses is an important theme in *The Mad Man*. If a defining term in *Triton* is ‘heterotopia’, its counterpart in *The*

Mad Man is 'ekpyrosis', which is found written in excrement on the wall of John Marr's trashed apartment after the philosopher's death by stabbing at the Pit off Times Square. Graduate student Marr, who is studying Hasler for a thesis, finds out that this is a term coined by the pre-Socratic philosopher Heraclitus, meaning conflagration or apocalypse, and "generally assumed to refer to the end of the universe, when everything ... would collapse into fire" (1994b:307).

Marr follows in Hasler's footsteps by simulating his proclivity for sexual experimentation, which leads to his own 'ekpyrosis' in an orgy eerily reminiscent of the one that preceded Hasler's death, and even featuring some of the same people. Marr understands 'ekpyrosis' as "that all-consuming, all-cleansing Heraclitean fire ... which is itself the Heraclitean notion of change and flux raised to such a level beyond flux or rage that nothing can escape it, that no man's or woman's flow can quench it" (1994b:480).¹¹

Both heterotopia and ekpyrosis function to challenge our concept of social order, and to break it down and reconstitute it in such a way that the constructed nature of reality, and our own complicity, is laid bare. The implication, of course, is that we can build society anew once we understand how it functions, which is one of the driving forces behind the utopian impulse. If utopia is taken to mean a dialectic by which the flaws in present social arrangements are highlighted through contrast with alternative arrangements, then *The Mad Man* can also be said to display utopian elements (which are countered by dystopian elements; one could argue that it is only by a considerable feat of divergent thinking that *The Mad Man* can be considered an example of utopian literature).

Like the latter novel, the former also engages with Foucault, but the quote that Delany highlights at the beginning of *The Mad Man* suggests a completely new focus on, or re-engagement with, Foucault: "The bios philosophicus is the animality of being human, renewed as a challenge, practiced as an exercise – and thrown in the face of others as a scandal" (1994b:5). Prefacing this is a prose poem or proem describing a winged centaur-like creature in graphic detail, beginning with its sexual organs, which also symbolises the site of sexuality, identity and gender that is circumscribed in the course of the novel.¹²

¹¹ Foucault provides a structuralist description of madness or heterotopia: "Things themselves become so burdened with attributes, signs, allusions that they finally lose their own form. Meaning is no longer read in an immediate perception, the figure no longer speaks for itself; between the knowledge which animates it and the form into which it is transposed, a gap widens. It is free for the dream ... Thus the image is burdened with supplementary meanings, and forced to express them. And dreams, madness, the unreasonable can slip into this excess of meaning" (1965:18-19). Ekpyrosis represents such a proliferation, where meaning is so overburdened or shadowed by interpretation that it descends into chaotic flux.

¹² The beast symbolises madness and chaos. Foucault notes that "madness fascinates because it is knowledge. It is knowledge, first, because all these absurd figures are in reality elements of a difficult,

Black, raddled, roped with veins, it rose like a charred tallboy from snarled loins. Below, the texture and colour of overripe avocados, testicles hung like rocks. It sagged in the envelope of flesh that held it to the belly, almost as high as the navel's gnarled pit. A black cock on a hulking white man? A dog's dick on a humongous buck? Only beyond seven feet, it wasn't a man... (1994b:1)

Delany goes on to describe how this creature defecates and urinates:

Now the tail jerked aside, to let honking gases, then drop its crumbling turd, black, grass- and bone-rich, steaming on the frost – while before its belly, urine arched, heavy, sudden, gold, to spill and splat, angrily on the macadam. Unconcerned with where it slopped, first it reached back to maul its still-delivering sphincter, then to raise the thick man hand, swung inadvertently through its stream, to its mouth, to enjoy its salts, the stench on its fingers... (1994b:2)

The importance of this description is highlighted further on when Marr is engaged in fellatio, and the recipient accidentally urinates into his mouth. Delany describes this voiding as “an arbitrary consecration, with the substance and essence – the bread and wine – of his body ... a gift of grace, that I could not have sought, but that only he could have given” (1994b:78). The biological functioning of the mythical creature of the poem is described as being totally naturalistic, and as being an integral part of the creature's existence. By terming the byproducts of the human body – which can be taken to include perspiration and seminal secretions – as bread and wine, though, Delany is consecrating them as being vitally symbolic of our corporeal essence. This, in turn, highlights Foucault's concept of the animality of being human, with Delany suggesting that the baser functions of being human should not be taken to mean that they debase existence. Instead it represents a level of intimacy with the physical body that is essential to the representation of a total human creature. This is akin to the utopian sentiment embodied in the Winged Ones of *They Fly at Çiron*, which represent an ideal mental and physical totality. In *The Mad Man*, there is a much greater level of graphic detail, which renders the utopian impulse heterotopic. This is part of the challenge and practice that Foucault argues must “be thrown in the face of others as a scandal”.

Hans James notes that the current thinking is that everything is constructed, a logical outcome of the critique of the self initiated by Nietzsche more than a century

hermetic, esoteric learning” (1965:21). The beast is a symbol of animality – a symbol that the novel seeks to embrace. Interestingly, the beast can also be linked to the Amnewor in ‘The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals’: “Both are collage monsters, formed of fragments and disparate traits, held together only by the desire of a reader to make them into a whole, to form them into a coherent entity” (Delany 1999:129).

ago (1995:1). Thus the subject is taken to be a fiction, “a function in social discourse through which certain modes of power are modulated” (1995:10). James states further that the concept of “a thoroughly constructed human being obviates the need for us to contemplate the bodily parameters that precede and work in concert with the constructions that develop at any particular site” (1995:12). This means that the body’s function as an interface in societal discourse supersedes its physical reality, which leads to disembodiment. Karlene Faith argues that “it is within the realm of the body that the personal becomes political and the individual becomes the collectivity”, and that it is “the most private intimacy”, sex, where “power is made public and resistance is most socially engaged” (1994:39).

Bristow argues that Foucault’s main contradiction is that, while the body features strongly as a “locus of power and transformation”, it “has no deep substance in his work” (1997:196). However, Delany’s proem is an invocation to the materiality of the human body, and can be seen as a critique of modes of discourse that diffuse this materiality into ephemeral power relations. James argues that Foucault’s failure to incorporate the materiality of the human body is a general failure of discourse:¹³

Where are we to find a place for Nietzsche’s bowels or the lust for Helen in our current discourse? ... Humans are simply *not* animals ... We are constructors, people who live outside of our bodies in the midst of power relations that may be brought to bear on bodies. (1995:29)

In *Triton*, Delany presents his version of an ideal society where the corporeality of the body is acknowledged and indeed institutionalised.¹⁴ The main protagonist is Bron Helstrom, who was involved in prostitution at the Flesh Pit in Bellona on Mars, a position which he thinks affords him some exclusivity: “These wholesome Outer Satellites were desperately accepting of any World-bound decadence: it supplied some sort of frisson, he suspected, ordinarily missing from their small-world lives” (1976:78–9).

Commenting on the impact of his experience as a prostitute, Bron remarks that, “sexually, at any rate ... you just got a pretty good idea of who you really were”, adding that, however, he was unsure “if it does anything for the relationship of a sexualisationship. Maybe it’s having so much sex right there ...” (1976:84). Sexualisationship is an interesting neologism referring to sexual and emotional compatibility, with the ideal blend being a perfect melding of the two aspects. It also focuses on a relationship as a process or a ‘becoming’, leading Bron to comment on

¹³ Or Foucault himself could simply be at fault for denigrating the corporeal or material aspects of life.

¹⁴ *The Mad Man* is an extension of this idea: its graphic detail is meant to ‘throw’ the corporeality of the body into the ‘face of others as a scandal’.

his progress in this regard: “Perhaps I never had much of a bent for relationships, even as a kid; which is why I went into prostitution in the first place. But it’s certainly made me more tolerant of a lot more different types of people than most ordinary Martians ...” (1976:84-85). Thus Delany sets the stage for the novel: the main character is an outsider with a particular past who is introduced to a new societal structure that he thinks he is superior to. This is, of course, the utopia of Triton. Along with the main protagonists, the reader will, as the plot progresses, experience this society in action: that is, how it assimilates someone like Bron, who is an outsider.

Delany raises the important issue of identity politics when Bron terms his friend Lawrence a ‘political homosexual’. He describes him as “‘this perfectly crazed, 74-year-old, unregenerated character who, whenever he gets drunk, is always making futile attempts on my tired, pale bod; then he sorts of revels in it when I reject him. I think it gives him some sort of masochistic solace’” (1976:89). Despite his stated tolerance of difference due to his ‘otherworldly’ status, Bron is surprisingly judgemental of Lawrence when he suggests that his sexual orientation is politically motivated rather than a genetic given. It seems that Bron tolerates Lawrence’s attempts at seduction because he is the one who derives ‘masochistic solace’ from the encounters, especially considering that it is his decision to stay where he is living: “He had been living at the men’s co-op (Serpent’s House) six months now. This one had been working out well” (1976:1).

The use of the word ‘serpent’ is an interesting reference to the Judaeo-Christian ‘fall of humanity’ story, for as the novel progresses it becomes clear that the garden of Eden that is Triton contains dystopic elements. “I am a reasonably happy man,” thinks Bron, and then he wonders suddenly: “Is it just that I am, happily, reasonable?” (1976:1) This suggests a psychological ambivalence related to the larger concern of his integration with the society of Triton as a whole. It is this double interface – between Bron and his inner self, and Bron and the society he inhabits – that becomes such a rich site for the contestation of identity and gender politics in the course of the novel.

A crucial character in this regard is the Spike: “working name of Gene Trimbell, producer, director, playwright, actress, general manager of a shifting personnel theatrical commune”, as Bron later gleans from General Information (1976:49). She is operating on a Government Arts Endowment “to produce micro-theatre for unique audiences” (1976:20). Her name has phallic connotations, as well as indicating her probing nature: she digs into Bron’s defenses in order to get to his character, but identity is as protean a construct as society itself. The Spike describes the artistic function of her work as follows:

“... basically we’re concerned with leading people gently into a single moment of verbal and spatial disorientation – I say disorientation: what I mean, of course, is a freeing, to experience a greater order than the quotidian can provide. A moment of verbal, spatial, spiritual energy in resolution. That’s so necessary in a world that’s as closed in as life in any satellite city must, of necessity, be.” (Delany 1976:88)¹⁵

It is significant that Bron is exposed to such a theatrical experience, which challenges his notion of reality, in the unlicensed sector or ‘u-l’, a part of the city of Tethys where there is no official law. This demonstrates the sophistication of the utopia of Triton: it recognises that social order, by definition, has its binary opposite in the form of opposition to the norm, or outright anarchy. The u-l is an attempt to pre-empt or disarm such anti-social impulses by acknowledging them, making space for their legitimate articulation in the ordinary social configuration, and thereby institutionalising and nullifying them as sources of disruption.

At founding, each Outer Satellite city had set aside a city sector where no law officially held – since, as the sociologist who had first advocated it had pointed out, most cities develop, of necessity, such a neighbourhood anyway. These sectors fulfilled a complex range of functions in the cities’ psychological, political, and economic ecology. (1976:9)

The u-l can be seen as a decentring device, as it fragments the city of Tethys into a series of convergent zones or areas, without a single locus or centre. This refers to Delany’s contention (outlined in the previous chapter) that society does not have a centre, but simply comprises intersecting margins and boundaries in an ever-shifting social matrix. Foucault adds another dimension to this dynamic: how does the social body stabilise and anchor the physical body, and vice versa? How do power and knowledge relations in the u-l differ from the rest of the city, and why? Added to this are certain poststructuralist concerns:

... Derrida refers to a centralised, stable meaning that the reader tries to draw out of a text. This idea of a centred structure is paradoxical. It seems to come from the text, yet is always finally defined as the reader attempts to pursue it. However, as Derrida states, the quest after the illusory signified (in the text, as well as in ‘philosophy’ or ‘science’) expresses the force of a desire, and according to many post-structuralist theorists, desire fulfilment is the crucial motivational force. This quest after meaning, and its connections to desire, are predominant in *Triton*. (Zaldivar 1999)

¹⁵ In Foucauldian terms, this micro-theatre is ‘heterotopic’. It also refers to Laclau’s notion of ‘dislocation’.

A key focus of desire fulfilment in the novel is the u-l, which Bron notes has a “definite and different feel” (1976:10) to its streets. Delany notes that “most large cities do develop areas kind of like the u-l”, and he mentions Soho in London, North Beach in San Francisco, East and West Village in New York, The French Quarter in Paris, and Freemont in Seattle (Philmus 1990:320). In imagining the u-l in Tethys, he “was wondering what would happen if urban planners formalised this, carrying it a few steps further” (1990:320). By formalisation, Delany means what would happen if such an area were demarcated within the urban landscape, and allowed to develop according to its own logic and evolutionary needs. There is a similar societally-differentiated area in *The Mad Man*, referred to as the Minnesota Strip – “but that name only lasted a season ... it doesn’t really have a name. Or, at least, it doesn’t seem to be able to keep one when it gets one” (1994b:149):

... all that surrounds this strip of conflicting absences, this construct of desire at its darkest and lightest, all that finally secretes the discrete and shabby elements that, together, make up this space, so that somehow it is a part of, as much as it is apart from, the world ... (1994b:151)

Delany assigns specific geographical boundaries to this area in order to signify its reality, and then he uses this physical space to circumscribe the psychological terrain it encompasses. It is a “few blocks on and off Eighth Avenue”, containing a plethora of doorways, bars, porn-magazine and peep-show shops and movie theatres. “In one sense all the encounters that occur here take place on some vast and dreary Audenesque plain where a thousand people mill, where no one knows anyone else” (1994b:148). It is this sense of anonymity and ubiquity that gives the Minnesota Strip, and indeed the u-l, their sense of transgressive danger, for this means that individuality is negotiable, and desire can be acted upon, instead of being constrained by the social compact.

It is in the u-l that we first encounter war posters, and such slogans as ‘Triton with the Satellite Alliance’, which gives the reader a glimpse of a larger, as yet unspecified, situation impinging on Tethys as a whole. Gradually we learn that the nine inhabited moons of the solar system – including, eventually, Triton, a moon of Uranus – are involved in a war with Earth and Mars, the only two inhabited planets. This has lead to a complex interrelationship between planets and satellites, with cultural and economic friction building up between the so-called Outer Satellites and Triton. Between these two factions sits Mars, which has sided with Earth. A few years before there was free play between all three societies, with Bron being a male prostitute on Mars in his teens. Delany states that

Helstrom is a misfit in the Outer Satellite community. His 'misfittedness' does not consist of the comic mistakes of the newly arrived immigrant trying to learn the new manners and mores ... His is the deep, cultural unhappiness that so frequently comes to people years after they have made all the surface adjustments (1989:96).¹⁶

The war remains in the background for most of the novel, and takes the form of "a political battle fought in negotiation rooms by diplomats" (Zaldivar 1999). It first impinges on Bron's life, and is thus foregrounded in the novel, in a rather spectacular fashion when Tethys experiences a 'gravity cut' or an interruption of the sensory shield that contains the atmosphere of the moon, and gives the illusion of a sky. This forms a double boundary, or a margin within a margin: Triton's status as a member of the Outer Satellites forms a boundary separating it from Earth and Mars, while the sensory shield itself is a boundary within which the utopian society has been constructed (1999). Delany notes that the sensory shield actually predetermines the type of social structure that has developed:

... the stringencies of life under glass – or under plasma – have made it necessary to restructure the whole concept of human society. Such a city simply cannot tolerate either a runaway population growth or a vast, unskilled labour supply that can do very little efficiently except breed. (1989:94)

Triton's complex utopian structure is gradually revealed to us through Bron's eyes. As the reader becomes more familiar with this society, questions of power and knowledge relations begin to surface: how does this social structure impact upon Bron? How does he interact with it? How typical a citizen is he? What, if anything, can such an open society not tolerate? The debate is recomplicated even further at the end when gender issues come into play. The novel ultimately does make an attempt to answer these questions, but it eventually reaches a stage beyond comprehension or simple articulation – that is, heterotopia or ekpyrosis, which holds out the final possibility of radical social transformation.

The Spike challenges Bron's summation of Lawrence as a 'political homosexual'. Her narrative function is thus to represent wisdom and insight, and to cut through Bron's defenses. She points out logically that Triton's is an age of regeneration and refixation treatments: "He can have his sexuality refixated on someone, or thing, that can get it up for him" (1976:90). She sums up Lawrence's predicament by declaring that he is unhappy, and is forcing his affections on people who will not reciprocate. This pertains equally to Bron himself, and thus the question

¹⁶ Interestingly, this quotation comes from an essay that Delany wrote under his pseudonym K Leslie Steiner, which he uses to comment on his own work. Delany's disavowal of his own authorship contributes to his own identity or role dislocation.

is raised as to why he does not consider refixation if he is unsure about his own identity.

But to take this step would require Bron to acknowledge that his identity, the very basis of his being, is in doubt. Thus, paradoxically, he chooses to contend with his frustration and uncertainty rather than attempt to get to the root of his problem. The Spike declares that “anybody who is concerned with sexualisation” – which presumably means the entire population of Triton – “who doesn’t take advantage of them, from pure prejudice – and it’s nothing more (Your Lawrence friend sounds like he’s from Earth.) – is a fool” (1976:90).

She qualifies this somewhat by stating that “refixation is a matter of desire, not performance. And I assure you, as one who is also a fair performer, desire is something else again” (1976:91).¹⁷ This leads Bron to wonder: “– And what am I hung up in ...?”, only to declare later to Philip that “I’m pretty straightforward too. At least about my emotions” (1976:104), which subtly underpins the confusion permeating Bron’s sense of his own self-identity. Zaldivar argues that Bron’s confusion is manifested in a sense of entrapment:

... Bron is caught in a trap, and he cannot work his way out. The trap is the Derridean quest for ‘centred structure’, taking the form of Bron’s self-identity. Bron desires a whole, stable, and unique personality and constantly pushes people away in search of his missing parts. (Zaldivar 1999)

Though noting that this is a “standard psychological-romance scenario”,¹⁸ Zaldivar points out that “Delany consciously leaves traces of his genre in his text”, which is most manifest in the appendices, themselves a heterotopic device to decentre conventional or generic assumptions about the text (1999). *Triton* parts company with other psychological romances because, “on Triton, you can be whatever you want to be. Bron’s lack of self-determination is out of place, a seeming rarity in this society” (1999). It is not ‘to be or not to be’ that is his defining question about himself, but what to be in a social context where anything is possible, and everything permissible. The one thing that this perfect society seems not to have considered is the possibility that, given such a surfeit of possible identities and sexual fixations, a person may be psychologically incapable of choosing at all. A revealing profile of Bron is provided by Audri:

¹⁷ This echoes Judith Butler’s notion of ‘gender performance’, as explicated by David Gauntlett. The traditional view is that sex (male and female) causes gender (masculine and feminine), which in turn produces desire towards the other gender in a sort of continuum. What Butler does, with the help of Foucault, is to deconstruct the perceived links in this continuum. The result is that gender and desire become flexible, with the implication that gender is a performance: “It’s what you *do* at particular times, rather than a universal *who you are*” (Gauntlett 1999).

¹⁸ Though how ‘standard’ a romance is *Triton*? Boy gets girl, boy loses girl, boy becomes girl ...

"I'd say you were a very ordinary – or special, depending on how you look at it – combination of well-intentioned and emotionally lazy, perhaps a little too self-centred for some people's liking. But you also have an awful lot of talent at your job. Maybe the rest are just the necessary personality bugs that go along." (1976:108)

Bron experiences an acute moment of psychological clarity about the consequences of his own actions when he acknowledges that "his own, involved, counter-espionage had lost [Miramne] a job. His own responses that he should have used as flexible parameters he had taken as rigid, fixed perimeters ... Suffering the wound of having wounded, he thought: Help me ... Somebody help me ..." (1976:109–110). This is Bron first's realisation that he has a serious problem, and his first attempt to reach beyond his own limited resources to find a solution – that he is only spurred on to do so at the crux of a crisis reveals the extent of his own self-delusion. The fact that Bron remembers to collect Alfred's ointment shows that he is capable of caring: it also displays social responsibility, if not accountability.

Predictably, Bron reverts back to type when he visits the Spike and wishes he could declare to her: "I come to tell you that no matter what that crazed lesbian says, I am not responsible for her losing her job – no matter what kind of louse she thinks I am!" Instead he says: "I came to find out about you, who you were and what you were" – which is really just his way of saying that he wishes to find out about himself, and because he projects his own inner voice onto the Other, as Lacan argues.

Noting that Bron is "all masked and veiled and swathed about in shadowy ceremonies" (1976:115), the Spike dons a white cloak and full-hood mask, and says: "Now we can roam the labyrinths of honesty and deceit, searching out the illusive centres of our being by a detailed examination of the shift and glitter of our own, protean surfaces" (1976:115). This sounds forced and pretentious in the context of a stand-alone quotation, but serves as an important précis of Delany's intentions thus far. As he explains:

By and large, today, in SF, you start with the texture of life around some character. Nor is that texture necessarily conceived of as 'the good life'. Rather, you say, what would be an interesting life-texture. If you have to have bad things, what bad things might you be able to stand? You look at the specific texture of the character's everyday world – not the greater political structure his or her bit of life is enmeshed in. Then, in the course of the fictive interrogation-of-the-material that makes up the rest of the book or story, you move – fundamentally – up and out ... towards the political. (quoted in Philmus 1990:307)

Such a shift towards a larger, encompassing socio-political dimension is indicated when Bron blurts out to the Spike (this when he had originally enquired about her): “I’m ... not happy in the world I live in” (1976:116). Her immediate response is a linguistic correction that decentres and denies the problem – she notes that Triton is a moon, and not a world, which refers to the Inner World/Outer Satellite schism. At first glance it seems that Bron has not articulated anything new, as the reader is aware of his unhappiness from the very first page. But what is different is that, for the first time, he has contextualised his dilemma in terms of the knowledge and power relations that enmesh him in a particular socio-political set-up – which, of course, is the ‘heterotopia’ of Triton.¹⁹

In the ensuing dialogue between Bron and the Spike, Delany fleshes out some of the structural detail which, up to this point, has only been implicit in the text. We learn that there are “40 or 50 basic sexes, falling loosely into nine categories, four homophilic”, meaning that “no matter who or what you like to screw, you prefer to live and have friends primarily from your own sex”, while the other five are ‘heterophilic’ – which sounds bizarrely like the institutionalisation of racial or ethnic segregation using sexual orientation as the basis of differentiation. What is notable about the picture of Triton that emerges from this dialogue is the sense of irony and outright humour that Delany injects into the discourse. Bron uses the example of the fetish “to manacle 18-year-old boys to the wall and pierce their nipples with red-hot needles”:

“... after work, you can always drop in to the place where the 18-year-old boys who happen to be into that sort of thing – red-hot needles on the second floor, ice-cold ones on the third – have all gotten together in a mutually-beneficial alliance where you and they, and your Labrador retriever, if she’s what it takes to get you off, can all meet one another on a footing of co-operation, mutual benefit, and respect.”

“And the kennel’s on the first floor?”

“And there’s one here in your unit, and one in mine, and probably a dozen more throughout the city. And if you’re just not satisfied with the amount or quality of 18-year-old boys that week, you can make an appointment to have your preference switched. And while you are at it, if you find your own body distasteful, you can have it regenerated, dyed green or heliotrope, padded out here, slimmed down there ... And if you’re just too jaded for any of it, you can turn to the solace of religion and let your body mortify any way it wants while you concentrate on whatever your idea of Higher Things happens to be, in the sure knowledge that when you’re tired or

¹⁹ Walter Meyers explains that *Triton* disturbs the syntax of things, as “characters can change their size or sex without much difficulty”, meaning that, in this future, the language of sex and gender has become “shattered or tangled” (1980:184).

that, there's a diagnostic computer waiting with soup and a snifter in the wings to put you back together." (1976:117–118)²⁰

Earlier on Bron wonders about "the things people will do to their bodies" (1976:112), revealing a prudishness – which is surprising given his history as a male prostitute – about physical transformation or alteration, which is symptomatic of his internal identity confusion as reflected in his discomfort at the fluidity afforded to external appearance by the social structure of Triton.²¹ The above passage also reveals a deeper discontent or even prejudice against Triton, where the expansion of the very concept of individuality has ironically prevented Bron establishing his own sense of individuality. "They make it so easy for you – all you have to do is know what you want" (1976:116) focuses Bron's central dilemma into a succinct equation: he does not know what he wants, nor why he does not know, and therefore what should have been relatively simple is recomplicated beyond his ability to cope.

This is transferred into resentment against the society he inhabits and the people he interacts with. Is this a tragic failure of the society of Triton to accommodate all difference, or is it merely the sad tale of a single deluded person's abject failure to avail himself of the wondrous opportunities of this 'best of all possible worlds', where there is "no twenty-first-century-style philosophical oppression, no twentieth-century-style sexual oppression, no nineteenth-century-style economic oppression"? (1976:116). From the reader's point of view, the latter contention seems to be the most plausible.

It is revealing that, in this dialogue between Bron and the Spike, we learn for the first time that Tethys has a social hierarchy – though this does not imply that the society has a central nucleus as it is constructed in concentric layers, much like an onion: the Ring is "a sort of scalloped endocycloid along the outer edge of the city compris[ing] the most lavish communal complexes in Tethys" (1976:118), which is where Philip lives. Bron comments on Philip's family:

It was beautiful, whole, harmonious, radiant – it was a family I'd have given my left testicle – hell, both of them – to be a daughter or a son to. What a place to have grown up in, secure that you are loved whatever you do, whatever you are, and with all the knowledge and self-assurance it would give

²⁰ Though satirical, this passage provides important insight into the mechanics of sexual desire, and how society suppresses dialogue on what it terms to be deviant. The following comment by Ray Davis on *The Mad Man* is equally applicable to *Triton*: "Sex, though defined as unspeakable or even 'unimaginable' madness, actually enables and expresses sanity ... No system is self-consistent; simply to live is to be in flux between what has been defined as sane and what has been abjured as unspeakable. And therefore, to follow desire outside culturally dictated boundaries – though never, of course, outside culturally *determined* boundaries – is to enable survival within the culture" (2000).

²¹ An interesting aside is that Bron could be expressing Delany's distaste for the focus on body alteration in cyberpunk.

you while you decided what that was. But the great lie those people hold out, whether they're in a commune or a co-op – and this, I suppose, when all is said and done, is why I hate them – even the ones I like ... is: Anyone can have it, be a part of it, bask in its radiance, and be one with the radiating element itself ... (1976:122)

Bron admits to the degrading aspect of prostitution as personal devaluation in terms of human relations, and refers to the sexual freedom of the Outer Satellites as “the golden myth of two worlds” (1976:124). It is a myth precisely because of his above-stated contention – that he cannot be a part of the ‘radiating element itself’ because he is unsure of what part he actually constitutes, or indeed if he can fit in at all: “What happens to the ones of us in whom even the part that wants has lost, through atrophy, all connection with articulate reason?” (1976:124).

Bron acknowledges that he is from another world – a world that Triton is at war with, and a world where things are done differently (1976:125). He cannot escape this fact because it has defined who he is up to this point – not only does he realise that this has made him an alien in an alien world, but that the very social structure of Triton demands that he sacrifice or subsume this alien heritage in the interests of the greater good, which is something that Bron is unwilling, or incapable, of doing, which leads him to declare to the Spike: “Then people like me should be exterminated” (1976:125).²²

It seems to Bron as if Triton as a whole is totally impervious to his dilemma: “It was all perfect, beautiful, without a crack or a seam. Any blow you struck was absorbed and became one with the structure” (1976:122). When on earth later, Bron declares: “I think I could enjoy this world, if we just got rid of the earthies?” (1976:216). Bron says to Sam that “maybe I’m just that odd and inexplicable point oh oh oh oh oh one percent they call an individual”, to which Sam replies “No. You’re a type like the rest of us” (1976:143). The fact that Bron cannot escape being part of Triton, or being a particular ‘type’ in relation to this is underlined dramatically when he is incarcerated on earth while accompanying Sam on a State mission, and is derogatorily referred to as a ‘Moonie’ held on suspicion of possible subversive intentions.

Bron’s self-centredness is revealed dramatically when he ‘bumps’ into the Spike and her troupe on an archaeological dig in Outer Mongolia, and takes her for dinner at the Swan’s Craw. Her unfamiliarity with the etiquette of the place – “the client’s job was to impress, not be impressed” (1976:199) – leads Bron to conclude, rather ungraciously, but in his estimation, ‘fondly’, that the Spike would “make a lousy whore” (1976:193). Her unalloyed delight at the theatricality of the event,

²² Bron could be said to be suffering from a form of cultural dislocation.

coupled with the fact that he is, once again, in the company of the woman he thinks he loves after ostensibly having gone “hundreds of millions of kilometres to forget her” (1976:156), simply goes over his head.

All that preoccupies Bron and predetermines his attitude to the Spike is his over-inflated concern with the social role-playing involved, with him mortified by the impression they were giving as a couple as being “a cheap Bellona john and ... a really dumb whore” (1976:197). In a moment of breathtaking cognitive dissonance, Bron declares to the Spike: “I love you. Throw up the theatre. Join your life to mine. Become one with me. Be mine. Let me possess you wholly” (1976:209). This is a stark manifestation of his own overweening self-interest, and the fact that he does not really understand the Spike at all as an individual – he just wants her to affirm, and repair, his own damaged sense of individuality. Also, what Bron is essentially asking is the Spike’s permission for him to dominate and possess her in terms of conventional male–female power relations.

On the return flight to Triton, Bron receives a facsimile copy of a letter from the Spike in which she states that she does not want to have an affair with him, or even particularly want to be his friend: “I don’t like the type of person you are” (1976:227–28). His initial reaction is righteous anger, as Bron says: “... all she was concerned with was that she’d bowed to the proper fashion” (1976:255). He concludes, grandly, that “there was just no understanding at all ... They don’t understand. They can’t understand. Men just have to go through it alone” (1976:256).

This reveals Bron’s view of gender relations as the binary opposition of male dominance and female submissiveness, with anything upsetting this equation deemed to be inferior. Bron’s attitude towards women is far from neutral, as earlier he had declared that “women don’t understand. Faggots don’t understand either” (1976:254) to Lawrence, implying that he considers ‘women’ and ‘faggots’ as equally derogatory terms, and as people with less status or power in terms of social relations. It is ironic that the homosexual Lawrence gives the following explanation to Bron about the true state of male–female power relations:

Let me tell you a secret. There is a difference between men and women, a little, tiny one at that, I’m afraid, has probably made most of your adult life miserable and will probably continue to make it so till you die. The difference is simply that women have only really been treated, by that bizarre, Durkheimian abstract, ‘society’, as human beings for the last – oh, say 65 years, and then, really, only on the moons: whereas men have had the luxury for the last 4 000. The result of this historical anomaly is simply that, on a statistical basis, women are just a little less willing to put up with certain kinds of shit than men – simply because the concept of a certain kind of shit-free Universe is, in that equally bizarre Jungian abstraction, the female ‘collective

unconscious', too new and too precious ... Your problem, you see, is that essentially you are a logical pervert, looking for a woman with a mutually compatible logical perversion. The fact is, the mutual perversion you are looking for is very, very rare – if not nonexistent. (Delany 1976:253)

In fact, it is so rare that “‘maybe one man out of 50 has it’”, with “‘the corresponding perversion you’re searching for in women, thanks to that little historical anomaly, is more like one out of 5 000’” (1976:254). It is during this discussion of bloodless statistics that Lawrence informs Bron that the war is over, with five million people dead on Iapetus, and 75% of the Earth’s population decimated. It is also at this point of the novel that Bron decides to become a woman, which at first seems a surprising and totally perplexing response to the Spike’s rejection.

Bron reasons that “‘women, or people with large female components to their personalities, are too social to have that necessary aloneness to act outside society’” (1976:257). He is referring to “‘that particular male aloneness’” (1976:257) which he has wrongly thought of as a sign of his lack of social integration. Instead it is a necessary precondition for the survival of the species, as it allows for the development of a peculiar ingenuity that is also, peculiarly, male – as demonstrated when Bron rescues a bunch of women and children during another sustained failure of Tethys’ atmospheric shield (here Bron neglects the fact that women can rescue people, too).

Bron argues that he is not saying “‘women can’t be courageous’” – instead, the fundamental difference is that women focus on society because “‘in one sense, women are society’” as they “‘reproduce it’” (1976:257). Therefore, Bron reasons that, by becoming female – coupled simultaneously with the advantages of having shared his peculiar male viewpoint – will enable him to become a unique member of society. Bron’s political/gender conversion is intimately connected to the war that Triton was reluctantly forced to participate in to preserve the integrity of its social compact, and to allow people such as Bron the freedom to express their own sociopolitical reality. This singular act of personal revolution, of societal redefinition, is the crux and turning point of the novel. It is, indeed, a heterotopic act. It is the very society of Triton in action.

What Bron chooses to do now – and through the very act of that choice, and even by its simple affirmation – means he is carrying out the fundamental, defining act of individuation that this world can offer him: total transformation, reinvention, and casting anew. This dissolves the final boundary separating him from the world he wishes to belong to, and feel an integral part of: his sex. What Bron fails to realise is that his sex is a construct or cultural configuration in which gender has a hegemonic stranglehold (Gauntlett 1999). What he chooses to do is termed ‘gender trouble’ by

Judith Butler: “the mobilisation, subversive confusion, and proliferation of genders – and therefore identity” (quoted by Gauntlett 1999). But Bron is caught up in the hegemonic stranglehold imposed upon his identity by his sex, and cannot free himself – even though he proposes to change genders.

Delany describes the process that Bron has to undergo as if it is a shopping expedition for a particularly complicated item, as if the commodification of gender change has resulted in its own peculiar sales pitch to convince potential customers that their needs are legitimate, and that the ultimate capitalist genuflection, the ritual act of commerce, can even solve psychological problems such as an identity crisis. Bron informs the technician that “genetically, hormonally, physically” (1976:267) he wishes to be a woman, and is rather taken aback when asked what sex he is at present. This implies that sexual/gender differentiation goes much deeper than mere physical differences. Bron is then given a brief lecture on the implications of this choice on his life, and some of the concrete impacts such a decision will translate into:

Ms. Helstrom, it would be completely fatuous of me to pretend I was unaware that, even in this day and age, such a decision as you have made may cause some consternation among one's co-operative, if not communal, colleagues. It's not hard not to find such consternation upsetting – not to mention those nameless social attitudes internalised during a less enlightened youth on a world with a different culture, that are, very often, the same attitudes to dissatisfaction with which prompted one to the decision confronting us now. And while we have our own emotional commitment to bolster us, these external prejudices assail us nevertheless, invariably presenting themselves in the guise of logic. (Delany 1976:268)

Although Bron tells Lawrence she “did it to preserve the species” (1976:277), when she bumps into the Spike again, she is willing to have an instant refixation in order to declare her continuing, unceasing love. It is unclear whether Bron is offering to change back to male, or to have her sexual profile reorientated to lesbianism. Later in a conversation with Brian, Bron confesses to not ‘feeling’ like a woman, and his counsellor tells him that “being a woman is a complicated genetic interface” (1976:298) between the physical growth of a body and its societal growth in the world it inhabits:

In that sense, you will never be a ‘complete’ woman. We can do a lot here; we can make you a woman from a given time on. We cannot make you have been a woman for all the time you were a man. (Delany 1976:298)

Brian's advice to Bron is to get involved with a man, and she visits a bar where she bumps into Sam, asks to join his commune as she finds herself attracted to him, and is turned down. Meanwhile, at work, Audri expresses her desire for Bron

who, in turn, rejects her. Both these encounters – male and female – suggest that Bron is unable to come to terms with herself sexually, and she is unable to determine whether or not this is a trace of her previous genetic disposition. The fact that Bron has not changed on a fundamental psychological level is illustrated by his account of meeting the Spike in his new gender. She describes the Spike as ““an incredibly ugly person”” who ““feels she can distort anything that occurs for whatever purpose she wants”” (1976:322). This is a rather acute description of Bron herself, whose gender change is a prime example of such distortion and delusion.

The act of lying to Audri does induce a crisis of conscience in Bron, who has a dream in which she is confronted by her old male self, who tells her that he will destroy her, as he, in turn, has been destroyed by her. This suggests that the new Bron has failed to integrate successfully with her new self. The novel ends with Bron’s realisation that her journey from Mars has not taken her away from her old self in the same convenient way as she had switched worlds: “Here I am, on Triton, and again I am lost in some hopeless tangle of confusion, trouble, and distress –” (1976:329). All that she has achieved is to fragment her precarious sense of self-identity even further, and to increase the distance between her ‘true’ self and the ‘social’ self she holds up to the world around her in order to ‘fit in’. At the end, she is still very much “an alien in an alien world” (1976:177).

The narrative falls curiously silent between this change and Bron’s first reappearance as her new self. There is a physical break in the text that also seems to represent a boundary that Delany does not cross. There is no physical description of Bron as a woman; no tactile landmarks as to how she feels to have breasts, or even how big her breasts are; how it feels to walk; the absence of a penis. Bron does not engage in any sexual acts after the gender change, so there really is not much to point out how different a person she now is (which, of course, could precisely be the point).²³ But in terms of the injunctions of ‘heterotopia’, as invoked by Delany himself, has he taken its powers of dislocation and disruption to a sufficiently advanced conclusion to make such discontinuity obvious in the face of institutionalised normality, to which it is meant to be a provocative contrast? What is the point of including such details? Sade’s injunction in *The 120 Days of Sodom*, as highlighted by Foucault, is that “your narrations must be decorated with the most numerous and searching details; the precise way and extent to which we may judge how the passion you describe relates to human manners and man’s character is determined by your willingness to disguise no circumstance ...” (1978:21). In other words:

²³ We have to assume that Delany’s lacunae are deliberate. Maybe the lack of detail is meant to indicate Bron’s failure to understand the concepts of sex and gender.

The object, in short, is to define the regime of power-knowledge-pleasure that sustains the discourse on human sexuality The central issue, then ... is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex, whether one formulates prohibitions or permissions, whether one asserts its importance or denies its effects, or whether one refines the words one uses to designate it; but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things that are said. What is at issue, briefly, is the overall 'discursive fact', the way into which sex is 'put into discourse'. (Foucault 1978:11)

Bron's change of gender is a political statement of sex as discourse. In changing his gender, he is also attempting to change the particular set of power relations he is enmeshed in, and to gain a sense of mastery or control over this invisible web binding him to society. The political discourse of sex is also at the forefront of *The Mad Man*, where John Marr has to come to terms with the impact of AIDS on his own sexual landscape. He learns that Professor Mossman is unconvinced that Foucault died of AIDS, as "it's just people trying to lump him in with a lot of other promiscuous gay men" (Delany 1994b: 109). Indeed, "philosophers just don't carry on the way you apparently have to in order to get it" (1994b:109).

Mossman is indignant at the very suggestion that an intellectual of the calibre of Foucault could engage in the sort of licentiousness that was seen to result in AIDS, whereas Marr is indignant that Mossman could think less of Foucault for being a complete human being of appetite and desire – no matter what his sexual orientation. The fact is that we are all complex, multifaceted creatures prone to surprising and random behaviour in the face of what society expects, and often demands, of us in order to help maintain the social compact. Just as the knowledge that Foucault died of AIDS does not conform to Mossman's Ivory Tower view of the systems of the world, so is Bron deluded about his own motivations for changing gender. He decides to do it in order to regain control of himself and his world, but the fundamental problem is that he has failed to come to terms with his own complexity and diversity as a human being enmeshed in a far-reaching web of power relations. Mossman's comments leads Marr to write an extraordinary 73-page letter to Sam about AIDS, politics and sexuality, which he concludes with his own 'model of the self':

There's a model for the 'self' that has as much to do with the way we misunderstand each other as it does with what we understand: each person is

assumed to have a public life, a private life, and a secret life. And the relation between them is assumed to be that the public stands before the private, as the private stands before the secret, each masking the ones behind from view. Much the same notion: the secret self resides within the private self, which resides within the clearly public self. Such a model holds that to delve through to the private or to the secret is to explain and obviate the public area we've just passed through to reach them. (Delany 1994b:182)

At the end of his epistle, the bulk of which is a series of vignettes of varying sexual encounters, Marr tells Sam that describing to her what he does in bars and cinemas has not given her access to his most private, or secret, thoughts. Even though his letter is explicit to the point of pornography, it does not permit the reader to claim intimacy with Marr. "It doesn't tell you what I think of the books I read or the movies I see. It doesn't tell you how I greet Mrs Conkling or Mr Espedrosa on the stairwell ..." argues Marr (1994b:181). In a similar fashion, Bron's gender change does not allow the reader access to his (or her) most intimate thoughts and desires before and after the deed. Perhaps Delany is deliberately silent on the anatomical specifics as a pointed lesson on the politics of sexual discourse and the model of the self as propounded by Marr. One cannot help but think of Delany's disclaimer at the beginning of *The Mad Man*, and wonder how right he is: even to begin to impute autobiographical 'truth' to the novel is to fail to understand the socio-political discourse that informs it.

So who is John Marr? The novel begins with his statement that, given his promiscuity, he is surprised he has not yet contracted AIDS. "My adventures with homosexuality started in the early-middle seventies, in the men's room of the terminal on the island side of the Staten Island Ferry," he comments matter-of-factly (1994b:7). The lightheartedness of the term 'adventures' rests uneasily with the somber weight of AIDS, while the fact that Marr began his apprenticeship in sexual deviancy in a place of public transport suggests a journey that has yet to end (or, perhaps, truly begin). Marr, "a young, bright, moderately middle-class black kid from Staten Island" (1994b:10), achieves his undergraduate degree in philosophy, and ends up working with Professor Irving Mossman on 'Hasler studies'.

Timothy Hasler is the sort of bright star in the firmament of academia that Mossman aspires to, and hopes to transform Marr into (given his own lack of transformation). Delany's summation of Hasler as an intellectual phenomenon cites a plethora of published papers and books – the first at 17, when Marr was "a cuddly

coffee bean of three” (1994b:11). These run the gamut from a semiotic analysis to SF stories “that, against titanic intergalactic backgrounds to dwarf *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, and *Dune*, turned on some of the finer mathematics that informed his articles on the philosophy of natural languages” (1994b:12). The fact that the SF extends Hasler’s philosophical speculations helps to subvert the ingrained perception that, naturally, the latter is the more serious and important work. In terms of Marr’s model of the self, this constitutes Hasler’s public persona. The private and secret enter the twilight realm of speculation and secrecy with Hasler’s “own shocking death” (1994b:12), stabbed fatally in a bar in New York City, leaving his doctorate unfinished. One is unsure from the juxtaposition if Hasler’s untimely demise, or the fact that his work was so abruptly terminated, was the most shocking event. And contrasted against this is the less-than-heroic figure of Marr himself:

... an underweight black cocksucker – with glasses – who knew that Wittgenstein was queer, not to mention Plato; and that there was this Frenchman some of my friends in college used to talk about, Foucault
(Delany 1994b:10)

The private and secret begin to seep into the public when Mossman discovers that Hasler was gay. And that he was killed in a gay venue known ominously as the Pit. He sees it as deception and a betrayal that people who knew Hasler have kept this from him. The implication is that a person’s public, private and secret selves are fluid and flexible: what is public to one is secret to another. One response to Mossman’s indignation is that Hasler’s sexual orientation was nothing of his business: ““You’re supposed to be writing the biography of a philosopher!”” (1994b:16). Mossman then begins to think that Marr has the intellectual edge on him in that he is gay, too. Marr comments:

... when I remembered the three portrait photos, doubtless still in Mossman’s office, I knew they looked quite different to him, now that they were a picture of *two* queers – with a bewildered Jewish (associate) professor off to the right.
(Delany 1994b:17)

Mossman’s biography on Hasler becomes “really problematic” (1994b:21) when he unearths evidence that “Hasler must have been indulging in the most degrading – and depressing – sexual ‘experiments’: bums on the New York City streets, homeless

alcoholics in Riverside Park, white, black, or Hispanic winos ...” (1994b:22). Mossman notes further that Hasler’s only criterion had been “the dirtier the better” (1994b:22), and concludes that he has “to consider seriously whether Timothy Hasler is the man I want to be writing about” (1994b:22). Mossman attempts to justify his response in a letter to Marr:

You know the sort of person I am, John. Most people don’t find me short on compassion. Especially for sexual oddities.

But what sort of compassion can I be expected to have for a man who writes an eight-page description in his journal about finding a Doberman loose in the park, bringing it home, feeding it, sucking its penis to orgasm four times, then turning it loose again. (He wrote he wanted to get him back to the owner, but the dog got away from him when he took it out for a walk. So he said.) (1994b:47)

Here Mossman is allowing his own innate prejudice²⁴ and intellectual arrogance to get the better of him, as well as making the mistake of conflating Hasler’s public, private and secret selves. He is also denying himself the opportunity of getting to know Hasler in all his multifaceted complexity as a human being, as well as revealing that he does not so much wish to write a biography as to remake Hasler in his own image of him. In other words, he wants to transform Hasler into the sort of person he would have been given the same opportunity. This desire for transformation is the same impulse that drives Bron to change his gender – to assimilate the Other and overcome the unknown by simply becoming the Other. Mossman is unwilling to take this step, but Marr is still young and curious enough to contemplate it. By attempting to trace the events leading up to Hasler’s death, he begins a journey of discovery and self-realisation that culminates in a transmogrification as totalising and radical as that embarked upon by Bron.

Marr visits the bar in which Hasler died in an attempt to glean information from some of the longstanding patrons about how this had transpired. The bartender is duly suspicious, and suspects Marr of being a reporter or a detective. He is rather taken aback when Marr informs him that he is a graduate student doing a Ph.D. in philosophy (1994b:352). The bartender explains that the Pit has its own philosophy or operating system by which it regulates social interaction:

²⁴ Mossman gives vent to his spleen by labelling Hasler “an obnoxious little chink with an unbelievably nasty sex life” (1994b:47) – ignoring the irony that an academic of his standing can submit to such coarse prejudice.

You hang around for another hour, hour and a half. Even on Tuesday night, once you get past nine o'clock, nine-thirty, this place makes the New York Stock Exchange look like a Sunday-school picnic. You talk about philosophy – really it's a matter of the philosophy of a place like this. (Delany 1994b:353)

Marr meets a homeless person known simply as Leaky, and finds himself intensely attracted to this shambling, seemingly simple-minded hulk of a man. Leaky proposes to Marr that ““you can climb on top of me and fuck my belly till you fill my hairy ol' belly button with cum. Then you can lick it out”” (1994b:362). At Marr's apartment, Leaky notices the laden bookshelves, and asks: ““You actually read all these fuckin' books? ... That's why Tony calls you the professor, huh?”” (1994b:362). Leaky says he is unable to read and write ““cause nobody ever really taught me”” (1994b:362). Clearly there is an immense gulf between the two men, but they regard each other with mutual respect and affection. Marr seems attracted to the sheer physicality of Leaky, and the fact that basically he has been reduced to the sum of his bodily appetites – a more honest way of living, say, than the prevarication and snobbery perpetuated by the Mossmans of the world. Perhaps Marr finds in Leaky what his secret self is yearning for, and this brings it out into the public and private spheres as well. Leaky makes an extraordinary request of Marr – he asks him to nip down to the corner pet shop and buy him a dog collar:

That I could wear on my neck. It don't have to have my name on it or anything. We stay together awhile, maybe we could get the name later. But just you givin' it to me, that would make me know you wanted me, like. And I'd feel better. If I knew I was your fucking dog. (Delany 1994b:395)

Marr notes earlier on that this part of the novel is a love story (1994b:333), priming the reader to expect a conventional infatuation and seduction scenario. Clearly with Leaky the word 'love' has to be used in its broadest possible connotations – but who are we to doubt Marr's feelings? Is he an unredeemable pervert, or more honest about his own feelings and desires than any of us would ever care to be? What is stranger: Bron changing gender, or a man seeking the sexual company of an indigent? I think the latter is more shocking to us, for Bron's gender change is as much a cerebral act as a physical one, while Leaky and Marr's relationship is couched in the conventional terminology of a love affair, while being anything but conventional. Clearly Leaky wishes to be 'owned' by Marr, and the dog

collar is a symbol of his lover's proprietary stake, as well as a parody of heterosexual convention where the female is dominated or 'owned' by the male. The dog collar leads Marr to ruminate on the nature of ownership when he receives a letter from the Old Poet, Almira Adler, signed 'Yours truly':

... what is contained in that most innocent of closings, 'Yours truly'? I am truly yours. I belong to you. And that belonging I mark with the terrible sign of 'truth'. Thus you are my owner. You own me.

I have put a collar on you that allows you to roam and, because the collar is a *true* sign of belonging, of ownership, of the genitive in its possessive mode, lets you return ... to what comforts, what privileges, what responsibilities, what violences?

Historical, political, and bloody, in a land built on slavery, what appalling connections were inscribed within that phatic figure? (Delany 1994b:409)

Leaky's friends visit Marr's apartment, and Marr is instructed to pay Tony a penny for Leaky. This exchange of currency also involves a social exchange, for what is being bartered is sexual favours and companionship. The corollary with slavery is obvious, as in the above quote, but the fact that such exchanges are consensual turns it into a purely commercial transaction. Perhaps it is this starkness, this parody of capitalist acquisitiveness, that makes the deed seem so infinitely more sinister. It is also ironic that the unit of currency is a penny, for in society's books these people are not worth even a ledger entry.

'Tony,' I said. 'Why am I doing this?'

'Huh?'

'Leaky said you'd paid a penny for him?'

'- yeah, when I bought him from Mad Man Mike.'

'- and now I have to give you a penny *back*?'

'Yeah.' He held the coin, copper tarnished nearly black, up between his fingers. 'Now you've bought him from me. He's officially yours now. We got beer - did they get the chicken?' (Delany 1994b:415)

What follows is an orgy focused on "the combinations and permutations of everyone hooking up with everyone else" (1994b:441), during which Marr's apartment is befouled and he writes the word 'ekpyrosis' in excrement on the wall. Central to this encounter are the ubiquitous pennies, the currency of pleasure and desire, and the token symbol of possession:

What stays with me, of course, were those moments that seemed in excess of this endless systematic interchange: at one point (and years later, I decided it was probably significant), Leaky had pretty much everybody's pennies; and the Mad Man, by fiat, simply redistributed the wealth, as it were, as absolutely and autocratically as any avatar of Marx might have done. (Delany 1994b:442)

Marr opens a pack of index cards belonging to Hasler sent to him by Adler, detailing a similar orgy with the Mad Man and his troop. Delany uses almost stream-of-consciousness prose interspersed with bracketed numbers, but no text breaks, to portray the writing style of the cards. The index cards mirror the events in Marr's apartment, but the corollary is that the cards form the raw data from which Marr constructs his own 'literary' event. Here the public, private and secret selves of both Marr and Hasler merge and become virtually indistinguishable. Just as Marr struggles to convey the sensory impact of the orgy, eventually resorting to Sade's "scary obsessiveness" (1994b:441) in plotting the permutations of perversion, so does Hasler struggle to find a 'metalanguage' that can give voice to the totality of his experience:

("... The sensation is as if [card 9] another language – a metalanguage I cannot speak – alone might be adequate to describe the ebullient feelings I have when I am around him, a metalanguage I am always yearning to understand when he is near: the madness of infatuation, of sex, of love.") Many read like rank pornography. "God, he's (card 12) got the biggest cock!") (1994b:458)

Events reach a climax when Marr finally learns the truth of Hasler's mysterious and shocking death at the Pit, and sees Crazy Joe die in front of him in an eerie doubling of events. It transpires that the philosopher had been killed when interceding in an argument, and in so doing sacrificed his life for another. Life, indeed, is infinitely richer than a handful of pennies.

I thought about presents. From inside the body. Timothy Hasler had, by throwing himself in the way of Dave Franitz, saved the Mad Man's life – though it cost his own. But I had not been able to save Crazy Joe. And neither had Mad Man Mike. Once again, I thought, perfectly lucid: Hasler has proved to be not only a remarkable philosopher but a remarkable man – certainly more remarkable than I. (Delany 1994b:479)

In a final twist, Marr receives correspondence from a student who visited Hasler the week before he died. He reports that, contrary to popular belief (which sustained the myth of Hasler's meteoric blaze into notoriety and perversity), the

philosopher's apartment had not been befouled, apart from a waterlogged ceiling. Though it seems as if the final veil has slipped from the 'truth', Hasler remains as enigmatic and unapproachable as ever. Marr makes the mistake of thinking that by catching a glimpse of the man's secret self he can lay claim to the philosopher's life as his own, but this proves futile from the beginning. The best way he can honour Hasler's memory is to be true to himself, as he shows splendidly in his tender romance with Leaky. Mossman is thrilled that Marr has solved the riddle of Hasler's murder, but Hasler is adamant that it was no riddle at all:

"It was just a matter of asking the right people the right questions. To a lot of people, it wasn't a secret at all. Only to the official forces – the police, people like that. It's a matter of getting yourself in the right system." (Delany 1994b:488)

Bron also strives to find the 'right system' in which he can be accommodated, but despairs that such a system exists. Rather than attempt the impossible and change the system, he decides to change himself. The notion of sex as discourse, which underpins much of *Triton* and *The Mad Man*, is suffused with what Foucault refers to as the "polymorphous techniques of power" (1978:11), meaning the web of power relations that permeates society.

In *Triton*, Delany portrays a society where sexual differentiation is institutionalised to the point where every imaginable whim or need can be catered for without infringing on the equally legitimate whims or needs of others. But the main protagonist, Bron Helstrom, is unable to 'fit in' into this best of all possible worlds; the interface between himself and the world he inhabits is incomplete. The question as to whether this is the fault of his society or is symptomatic of Bron's general failure as a human being, is left unanswered.²⁵ What interests Delany is the boundary between the two, and how these are continually crisscrossed by the web spun by societal pressures and individual human drives. All that Bron is left with at the end of the novel is existential crisis.²⁶ As Celia Kitzinger notes:

... the inability to predict or control events produces a state of existential anxiety. Ordinarily, existential anxiety operates at the unconscious level, producing a tension that drives us to seek relief from its otherwise

²⁵ One is led, though, to conclude that a society that makes an individual feel so dislocated is definitely flawed.

²⁶ This is precisely Foucault's point about the impact of heterotopia. He states that the "sick mind [which can be taken to refer to Bron Helstrom] continues to infinity, creating groups then dispersing them again, heaping up diverse similarities, destroying those that seem clearest, splitting up things that are identical, superimposing different criteria, frenziedly beginning all over again, becoming more and more disturbed, and teetering finally on the brink of anxiety" (1970:xviii).

immobilising effects. One major response to this existential uncertainty and its resultant anxiety is to enter into the cocoon of a power relationship. Power relationships create, both for the ruled and the ruler, the illusion that life is reasonably under control, at least if certain beliefs are upheld and behavioural conditions are met. (1994:127)

Bron's ultimate discovery is that, even though he undergoes radical change by switching to a female sex, nothing else changes. He still inhabits the same social context, and the power imbalance between men and women is perpetuated. Indeed, he comes to realise that "the longstanding power imbalance between males and females is woven into the manifold arrangements that constitute the social context" (1994:128). This is indicated in *Triton* when Bron returns to work after her sex change, and Philip asks her if it "goes all the way down" (Delany 1976:282). Kitzinger points out further that "the potency of the gender role blueprint affects men and women across societies and across generations" (Kritzinger 1994:126). If sexuality is a social construct, then the logical conclusion is that "sexual activity is translated into sexual identity" (1994:195). Heterosexuals do not think of themselves as heterosexuals, for this is the dominant, and therefore normative, sexual identity. "Heterosexual" is a silent term, a submerged and taken-for-granted aspect of the self, which is rarely consciously articulated" (1994:196).

... sexuality has been prioritised as reflecting fundamental aspects of the 'true self', and sexual activity is held to have major identity implications for those who deviate from heterosexual norms. The social power serves to control and shape our purportedly 'basic' sexual activity, by forcing us to confront questions about who we 'really' are on the basis of what we do in bed. (Kritzinger 1994:196)

This leads Kitzinger to conclude that heterosexuality "in and of itself" (1994:198) is the cornerstone of male power, with the heterosexual couple as the basic unit of this political structure.²⁷ Therefore it is difficult to change sexualities, as Bron discovers, for dominance and submission are the defining terms of sex in our culture. "We know we are having 'sex' and deriving 'sexual pleasure' when we act out the relationship between power and powerlessness, oppressor and oppressed," argues Kitzinger (1994:204).

The language we use around sexuality is riddled with images of dominance and subordination. The word 'passion' comes from the same root as 'passive'; we are 'overcome', 'overwhelmed', or 'overpowered' by desire, we 'submit to a loved one' who has 'captured' our heart. Violence and sex are explicitly

²⁷ And sexuality is a deep aspect of identity.

linked ... The comparison of the penis to an instrument of domination, a gun, is commonplace ... (1994:206)

However, Radtke and Stam note that “power is both the source of oppression in its abuse and the source of emancipation in its use” (1994:1). If sexuality is a social construct, then so is gender, which “is constituted within a particular set of power relations and hence reflects those power relations” (1994:9). Another way to articulate this is to say that gender relations and power relations are two sides of the same coin, as “‘female’ and ‘male’ are shaped not only at the micro-level of everyday social interaction but also at the macro-level as social institutions control and regulate the practice of gender” (1994:13). Bron thinks that changing sex is the answer to her societal maladjustment, as having been male will afford her a unique understanding of the male–female divide, and indeed enable her to bridge the gap. But her transformation raises more questions than it answers, questions such as those articulated by Bristow:

Is erotic identity specific to one’s sexed body? Or is it a fluid phenomenon that traverses a complex ensemble of gendered meanings – a whole range of femininities and masculinities that are not necessarily grounded in the anatomical distinction between the sexes? (Bristow 1997:209)

Bron herself provides a cogent summation of her predicament:

At one point there had been something she had thought she could do better than other women – because she had been a man, known firsthand a man’s strengths, a man’s needs. So she had become a woman to do it. But the doing, as she had once suspected and now knew, was primarily a matter of being ... (Delany 1976:262-3)

Bristow argues that “restrictive binary logic” (1997:211) has ensnared critical perceptions of sex and gender, and points to Judith Butler’s reasoning that, “if sex is fashioned by nature, while gender is generated by culture, then these two phenomena emerge from divergent sources” (1997:211). The obvious conclusion therefore is that gender does not necessarily follow from sex:

Taken to its logical limit, the sex/gender distinction suggests a radical discontinuity between sexed bodies and culturally constructed genders. Assuming for the moment the stability of binary sex, it does not follow that the construction of ‘men’ will accrue exclusively to the bodies of males or that ‘women’ will interpret only female bodies. Further, even if the sexes appear to be unproblematically binary in their morphology and constitution (which will become a question), there is no reason to assume that genders ought also to remain as two. (Bristow 1997:211)

A binary gender system is based on the assumption that sex and gender mirror each other, but when gender is separated from sex, it is transformed into “a free-floating artifice”, with the result that the terms male and masculine and woman and feminine are not restricted to male and female bodies respectively (Bristow 1997:211). Thus it can be seen that Bron’s revolutionary act of self-transformation, far from being as radical a social statement as he had envisaged it to be, instead perpetuates the prevailing binary gender system. Instead of setting himself free, he merely shifts his condition to the opposite end of the male–female divide. Butler states that gender must be envisaged as a “pluralising concept, one that envisages many different femininities and masculinities in all their variety” (Butler 1997:212). The true challenge is to recognise that heterosexuality is accorded its status as being natural and normal simply because “the binary structure of gender finds its complement in opposite-sex attraction” (1997:213).

This is compellingly illustrated when Bron decides that she has integrated her new female persona sufficiently to contemplate opposite-sex interaction, and enlists the help of Prynn to recommend a place where she can meet men. Bron notes that the places she had used in the men’s co-op for this purpose had been “places where people drank long and lingered late. It was a collection of reasonably happy men and women” (Delany 1976:304).²⁸ She hopes to duplicate this process. It is revealing that Bron is basing her new existence on her past experiences and recollections, when her stated aim had been to cast herself anew. This attachment to an inseparable past is signified most obviously by the fact that Bron retains the name of her previous sex – when naming is the most obvious level of identification and signification, and the easiest to change.²⁹ Prynn describes the structure of the bar, which mirrors the male–female power-relation split it is meant to facilitate:

“This is the active side of the bar, i.e., if you want to check out the beauties languishing on that side, without being bothered,” Prynn explained. “That side if you want to be approached by someone who’s made up their mind from this side. And that there is free-range territory.” (Delany 1976: 304)

Bron seems to deny that her aim is a sexual encounter when a man approaches her, and she tells him that there are 150 other people “more interested in it than I am. Now get lost. And if you don’t, I’ll kick you in the balls” (1976:306). We learn for the first time that, in Bron’s past life as a Martian prostitute, he had been raped by

²⁸ This echoes Bron’s musing at the beginning if he was reasonably happy or, happily, reasonable (1976:1).

²⁹ However, Walter Meyers points out that “first names have become no more reliable an index of gender than last names are of family descent” – hence *The Spike* refers to a woman, and *Flossie* to a man (1980:184).

five women, which leads her to wonder that it is actually sex she is afraid of – but then she realises that “it was everything else that circled the sex” (1976:307), meaning the power relations enmeshed with and recomplicated by sexual identity.

Bron sees Sam, approaches him, and asks him if he needs any new wives in his commune – this is the same Sam that Bron had dismissed early on in the novel as “just a standard, annoying type” (1976:30), who had once shocked him by revealing that he had undergone a sex change and been refixated on “sallow, blonde, blue-eyed waitresses ...” (1976:149). Bron’s question to Sam is meant to be a deprecatingly ironic introduction of her new identity, but it merely pays lip service to the dominant male–female power relations. With no physical description of Bron in her new sex role, and with her retaining her old name, it is difficult for the reader to envisage this encounter as being male–female, which is perhaps Delany’s way of illustrating how entrenched dominant sexual identities are in terms of the power relations they underpin. Bron acknowledges that she is a woman made by a man for a man, as her therapist Brian tells her, when Sam rejects her offer:

He could come here, could sit and wait, could prowl and search, as she had once sat or prowled, searching for the woman who would know, who would understand. Men could do that. She had done it when she was a man, and had found, prowling or being prowled by, five hundred, five thousand women? But she had no way to show she knew, because any indication of knowledge denied that knowledge’s existence in her. (Delany 1976:313)

Thus the ultimate irony of Bron’s situation is that, instead of elevating herself above the male–female divide, a position she thought she would be afforded after her sex change due to her former male viewpoint, she now simply finds herself on the opposite, and lower, side of that divide. She has inside knowledge, so to speak, of how both male and female sexual identities are perceived and construed by society. But Bron also comes to realise that gender relations do not have to be defined solely by sexual identity, as when she says to Brian that she just does not “feel like a woman” (1976:296).

“I mean all the time, every minute, a complete and whole woman. Of course, when I think about it, or some guy makes a pass at then me, then I remember. But most of the time I just feel like an ordinary, normal... . (Delany 1976:296)³⁰

The fact that Bron cannot articulate her inadequacy is symbolic of the emptiness in her life, the space or buffer between herself and the society she inhabits. Ironically, Delany repeats the beginning of the novel right near the end: “She had

³⁰ The missing word here, of course, is man.

been living at the women's co-op (the Eagle) six months now. This one had been working out well" (1976:285). The Eagle suggests a perspicacity of vision that is Bron's too late, as when Sam's true worth becomes known – in the moment when he rejects her advances:

But he was there, like all she could ever remember imagining, as new as now and as familiar as desire. She watched, numbing, knowing she had known him laughing among his hard-drinking friends, dark brows a-furrow in concentration over a problem whose solution might roll worlds from their orbits, carelessly asleep on a bed they had shared for the night, his eyes meeting hers in an expression that encompassed all the indifference of now but backed by the compassion of the unspeakably strong, the ineffably wise, and the knowledge of half a year's companionship. (1976:307)

What had prevented Bron from realising Sam's true impact on her until now, or to take advantage of the companionship that had evolved between them, was the artificial divisions of class distinction. Bron's personal act of revolution against the power relations that keeps her in place in the society of Triton like a fly in amber, her sex change, does not alter that place, but merely shifts her position in relation to the people she interacts with: the Spike, Lawrence, Audri and Philip are all re-perceived in the light of her personal transformation, which ultimately is a failure because Bron retains that which she is trying to escape from: her maleness. Woodward remarks that

while we potentially have the means to exert an unprecedented degree of control over bodies, we are also living in an age which has thrown into radical doubt our knowledge of the consequences of this control, and of how we should control our bodily selves [T]he more we have been able to alter the limits of the body, the greater has been our uncertainty about what constitutes an individual's body, and what is 'natural' about a body. (1997:67)

Perhaps a more defining act of Bron's personal revolution than her sex change itself occurs when she turns down Audri's offer to form a co-op unit on the Ring, Triton's most exclusive residential area, representing a level of status that Bron had always aspired to. Delany complicates this picture in that it is unclear whether or not it is the notion of a lesbian relationship that Bron is objecting to.

Near the beginning of the novel, Delany introduces the concept of the 'ego-booster booths'. The function of the booths is to offer "minor credit" and "slightly more major psychological" support to the Government Information Retention Programme (1976:5). With the insertion of a two-franq coin into a slot, together with a government identity card, the viewer is afforded three minutes of personal videotape selected from the government's own information files.

Ten years ago a statute was passed that any citizen had the right to demand a review of all government information on him or her. Some other public channeller had made a stir about getting the government simply to stop collecting such information; but such systems, once again, insinuate themselves into the greater system in overdetermined ways: jobs depended on them, space had been set aside for them, research was going on over how to do them more efficiently – such overdetermined systems, hard enough to revise, are even harder to abolish. (Delany 1976:5)

This is a somewhat ironic reversal of the ‘Big Brother is watching you’ syndrome, with the government cleverly disguising its blatant invasion of privacy in the form of a social service. Bron notes that, “for two years, while finding the booths derisively amusing in theory, he had never gone into one – as silent protest” (1976:6). But he then realised that this is the general feeling about the booths, which means that, contrary to his constant striving to be different, he is still part of the unfeeling masses. “He hated being a type,” he thinks (1976:6). Lawrence notes:

... everyone is a type. The true mark of social intelligence is how unusual we can make our particular behaviour for the particular type we are when we are put under particular pressure. (Delany 1976:6)

Significantly, the phrase ‘KNOW YOUR PLACE IN SOCIETY’ is written on the sides of the booths (1976:4). Bron is first signified in the novel when his name appears in the screen of the booth, followed by a 22-digit government identity number. The booth, which has also been vandalised, breaks down when he attempts to access his personal three minutes of fame, and he panics about how to remove his card from the machine (1976:7). Bron spends the entire novel trying to determine his place in an overdetermined society. His ultimate solution to his existential crisis is to change sex from male to female, but sexual preference and gender identity are not neatly and conveniently separated by the interface of the human body. Our notions of who and what we are in terms of our identity are held in place, maintained and reinforced by a complex web of power relations that uses the human body as a site of difference and conformity, as Woodward notes:

[O]ur bodies are constraining as well as facilitating, while they are alive and not simply because they die. Our bodies cannot be controlled at will and neither are they wholly accessible to us: a circumstance which helps to explain the power of social judgements and classifications on our self-image. (1997:73)

She adds that the body is a point of view “on which we have no point of view” (1997:73), which indicates how the body can be linked to social inequalities. If the “bodily bases of people’s actions and interactions are socially structured in different

ways", meaning that "our fleshly physicality is moulded by social as well as 'natural' processes", then it can be appreciated how crucial a site the body is as "it shapes our identities and structures our interventions in, and classifications of, the world" (Woodward 1997:65). This picture is not as simple as it sounds because, while science has given us an unprecedented level of control over the body, "we are also living in an age which has thrown into radical doubt our knowledge of the consequences of this control, and of how we should control our bodily selves" (Woodward 1997:67). This has made it difficult to determine the 'limits' of the body:

...the more we have been able to alter the limits of the body, the greater has been our uncertainty about what constitutes an individual's body, and what is 'natural' about a body ... Advances in transplant surgery and virtual reality exacerbate this uncertainty by threatening to collapse the boundaries which have traditionally existed between bodies and between technology and the body. (Woodward 1997:67)

Woodward defines a 'body project' as a means of expression by an individual to increase his or her control over their flesh: "if one feels unable to exert influence over a complex society, at least one can have some effect on one's body" (1997:71). Bron's sex change represents such a body project, but instead of changing her relationship with Triton's society, it merely perpetuates the male-female divide that underpins the dominant societal power relations. Bron's ultimate failure is her failure to realise that the "rigid either/or" classification of the sexes is a "convenient social construct and not a biological reality" (1997:75). As Woodward observes:

Given the variety of genetic types and hormonal conditions which characterise individuals, it is impossible to classify with absolute accuracy all humans into the restrictive categories of male or female ... Why, then, does the view of women and men as opposites remain so popular? (1997:75-6)

Another type of body project is represented by the transsexuals of *The Mad Man*, with whom John Marr feels a curious affinity that he is unable to explain. On one level it is because their sexual identities have placed them all beyond the boundary of conventional society but, on another level, Marr is also attracted to their radically subversive act – their assault on the source of their sexed and gendered identities, the wellspring of the power relations that has them trapped at its nadir (or zenith?) – their bodies.

We are guilty that we are not them – are not those boys destined to run the systems and cities of the world: that puts a rift between us. They, on the other hand, are terrified, lest through some inexplicable accident, some magic

happenstance of sympathy or contagion, they might become us. In most of them, we know, that terror can be repressed before adolescent curiosity. But we also know that that terror, given the license of adult exercise in the darkness of unquestioned moral right, can assume murderous proportions: our deviance, our abnormalities, our perversions are needed to define, to create, to constitute them and make them visible to each other and to themselves. (Delany 1994b:155–156)

Triton represents a society where a conscious effort has been made to provide a societal and psychological space in which such deviance, abnormality and perversion can be harnessed for the social good – namely the u-l. Everything in Triton is strictly regimented, from its 40 or 50 basic sexes to urban planning, with the city of Tethys using seven different types of urban units – “though for practical purposes you only had to be familiar with two of them to find anything you wanted in most of the city ...” (1976:187). Such regimentation is resisted and subverted by the concept of heterotopia, which contests the institutionalised nature of utopia. The society of Triton has a gritty social and political reality, but the reader finds it difficult to experience this as a lived reality with the same pungent immediacy and pathos of the transsexuals of *The Mad Man*, for example. Concepts such as deviance, abnormality and perversion are implicit in, but never explicitly referred to, in the somewhat sterilised world of Triton.

One of the themes in *Triton* concerns sublimating gender, while *The Mad Man* addresses the issue of what it means to be truly human – and the indulgence of what is deemed depravity by society at large as a ritual act that can put us in touch with our baser, and perhaps truer, animal selves. It is this deeper atavistic connection that Bron is missing. He has lost touch with himself as a primal sexual being – this is not a question of gender, but an issue of animality and instinct, of primal sexuality. And of personal integration. Indeed, while Bron seems to think that the root cause of his problems is gender, and hence undergoes a sex change, Delany is de-emphasising gender by contextualising it as part of general psychological health – which suggests that Bron’s real problem is his inability, whether male or female, to relate to others. Triton is a future society of infinite scope, where “experimentation could provide a radical contestation of the roles and sexual identities that modern society had imposed on all its members” (Miller 1993:255).

Miller refers to the concept of ‘asceticism’, defined as “the labour that one undertakes by oneself in order to be transformed” (1993:258). Bron’s own ‘asceticism’ or act of transformation is to change genders – which is merely a sociological adjustment in terms of his society, and not the revolutionary act it would be in ours. *The Mad Man* fleshes out this concept of transformation: in order to become fully human. To

transcend the limitations of the boundary between the self and society, one has to surrender to Foucauldian 'madness':

No matter how strenuously a culture tried to outlaw the Dionysian impulses, it could only be fettered, never transcended: after all, Dionysus, in the Nietzschean view, symbolised the power of transcendence itself. (Miller 1993:105)

Transcendence through transgression is the particular journey of discovery traced in *The Mad Man*, with an emphasis on language and its role in stabilising the 'systems of the world', which Delany uses as a general term for institutionalised society. Miller highlights three crucial aspects of Foucault's understanding of language and the 'order of things': that language "makes possible order and reasoned knowledge of the world", that language "makes thinkable the unreal and unreasonable", and that language

therefore calls into question the world and ultimately itself in a dizzying spiral of possibilities and impossibilities, realities and unrealities, that may well climax ... in a mad and lyrical embrace of the void, oblivion and death – that 'formless, silent, unsignifying region where language can free itself'. (1993:133)

In *The Mad Man*, some of Hasler's notes include the statement that language is a 'stabilising' mechanism, as opposed to a 'producing' mechanism – in other words, it anchors or defines reality. But Hasler contends further that it is not contradictory to state "that the world is constituted entirely of language", which implies that it is "constituted by the structure of its stabilising forces" (Delany 1994b:68). A fundamental social construct such as power relations is also a construct of language, with the logical outcome that social reality can only be mediated through language, and not experience, as experience has to be articulated first before it is relevant in a societal context. Delany takes this idea even further by arguing that even thought is part of language, and cannot be separated from it as a separate 'stabilising' process:

Thoughts are never not clothed in language – or, rather, that's not the relation between thought and words: the relation between a body and a suit of clothes. Thought is part of language. But everything we perceive, either through our senses, or through our bodily feelings, or through sitting in the dark with our eyes closed, remembering or thinking or figuring, is the linguistic signified. The whole range of human perceptions, of subject and object, is the 'meaning' part of language. (1994b:305–306)

Delany's comment that everything we perceive is the linguistic signified leads back to Mario Pei's contention in *Babel-17* that society can only be perfected once its language is perfect. It is significant that heterotopia challenges the concept of utopia at the level of language, by contesting the "very possibility of grammar at its source" (Foucault 1970:xviii). Delany seems to suggest that, if we are defined by language, then the only legitimate way to change our self-definition is to cast the language itself anew, and the first two words in this vocabulary of social revolution are heterotopia and ekpyrosis. The all-consuming Heraclitean fire that rages at the end of *The Mad Man* is perhaps the ultimate form of deconstruction, where all binary opposites, and even the concepts of subject and object, dissolve into flux.

What, within the systems of the world, I pondered, turning away, turned and returned eternally, posited about and around possession, truth, and the home – position and thesis, opposition and antithesis – among which I occupied one place and a man whom the world called homeless occupied the Other ... even as I had dreamed of bringing him across the boundary between, into mine, through whatever marks he assigned me to assign him (Delany 1994b: 407)

And, by invoking ekpyrosis, this final boundary is crossed, rendering the world totally transparent, and infinitely rich, in its limitless possibilities of existence.

Chapter Three

The Body of the Text

This chapter will look at 'The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals' (1989), in order to illustrate Delany's theoretical engagement with the broader concept of genre, and the implications this holds for SF itself. From the outset it is necessary to indicate an initial position that Delany adopts with regard to the critical function of SF:

Science fiction is not about the future; it uses the future as a narrative convention to present significant distortions of the present. ... Science fiction is about the current world – the given world shared by writer and reader. But it is not a metaphor for the given world, nor does the catch-all term metonymy exhaust the relation between the given and science fiction's distortions of the given. (Delany 1984:47–8)

This chapter will attempt to illustrate how Delany redefines SF as a signified, and how he uses this revitalised signified in the context of genre, a project that sees Delany going against the grain of conventional theorising and thought about SF, as indicated by his startling assertion that SF is not about the future.¹ Delany is not attempting to refute the accepted props of the genre that indicate its futurity, such as space travel and alien worlds – props which he himself uses in the course of his own work.

Instead, Delany is referring to the relationship between SF and the real world. He is saying that SF is not about some future so unfathomably distant that it is totally divorced from our own lived reality, but that SF and the real world are in a continual, mutually-reinforcing dialogue with each other. As Kathleen Spencer remarks, Delany's main philosophical concern is the construction of models and, in particular, the role that language plays in the modelling process:

How do the models adopted by individuals or cultures shape their perceptions and responses? How can we determine the relative coherence, accuracy, or appropriateness of comparative models? To what extent can a model actually succeed in mastering the thing it models? (Spencer 1985:60)

Spencer argues that, as an SF writer, Delany raises these concerns in the light of a single overarching question: how does fiction model the real world? Given the

¹ For Le Guin this is akin to saying that SF has been regressive and unimaginative: "All those Galactic Empires, taken straight from the British Empire of 1880. All those planets – with 80 trillion miles between them! – conceived as warring nation-states, or as colonies to be exploited, or to be nudged by the benevolent Imperium of Earth toward self-development – the White Man's Burden all over again. The Rotary Club on Alpha Centauri, that's the size of it" (1989:94).

paradoxical notion that SF is not about the future, as Delany claims, then what exactly is its relationship to the real world? What sort of modelling process does it engage in, and what is the kind of model that results? Painted in broad strokes, these are some of Delany's main theoretical concerns that will be highlighted in this chapter.

Delany gives an example of the relationship between a model and what it models in *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* (1977) where he describes how he made a drawing through a window of a tree in a garden in a rainstorm. Obviously, the real tree precedes the drawing, and the 'meaning' of the drawing results from repeating the recognisable pattern of the signified as 'tree'. However, Delany also points out that the modelling process is complicated by an intricate web of assumption and assertion, as mirrored in the relationship between fiction and reality (1977:71).

Delany's interest in the modelling process is illustrated by the fact that *Triton* and the Neveryon cycle have the overarching title of 'Some Informal Remarks Towards the Modular Calculus' (Samuelson 1994:22). *Triton* the novel is 'Part One', while Appendix B is 'Part Two', and 'The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals' is Part Five. Spencer comments that *Triton* marks Delany attempt "to explore the problems of modelling ever more directly and explicitly", meaning in ways that are "less and less traditionally fictional" (1985:62).

One of Delany's critical aims is to explore the boundaries of SF as a marginal genre by applying non-generic theoretical techniques and concerns. Describing the structure of *Triton*, Spencer points out that, while the form of the novel is fairly traditional – that is, conventional – "there are some distinct peculiarities creeping in around the edges" (1985:62). The first is the fact that the novel has two subtitles, 'Part One' and 'An Ambiguous Heterotopia', a reference to the subtitle 'An Ambiguous Utopia' of Ursula Le Guin's 1974 novel *The Dispossessed*.

Spencer argues that the subtitle referring to the 'modular calculus' is likely to puzzle readers for, while sounding vaguely scientific, it seems out of place in an SF context – as are the "formidably intellectual" (1985:62) epigraphs used in the novel, featuring Mary Douglas, Willard van Orman Quine, Michel Foucault, Spencer Brown, and Wittgenstein. Just as SF, a paraliterary genre, is perceived to be marginal to literature, so do Delany's concerns in *Triton* seem to be marginal to SF itself.

Triton has two appendices, 'From the Triton Journal: Work Notes and Omitted Pages', and 'Ashima Slade and the Harbin-Y Lectures: Some Informal Remarks Towards the Modular Calculus, Part Two'. The first comprises deleted pages from early drafts, while the latter is a fictional essay by Ashima Slade dealing with the science of 'metalogic'. Slade is mentioned briefly in the course of the novel, but does not appear as a character, while the central protagonist, Bron Helstrom, is a metalogician. The appendix fleshes out some of the historical and philosophical

background of the world of *Triton*, but while its relationship with the novel itself seems totally arbitrary, it provides Delany with a crucial opportunity to explicate some of the philosophical ramifications of the preceding work. As Spencer notes:

The appendix allows Delany to maintain a fictional stance and still discuss directly (non-representationally) the philosophical problems whose relevance the novel has just demonstrated. The second appendix, then, is both a guide to criticism of the novel and an additional text itself needing interpretation, its function as part of the artistic whole a question which must be answered to understand the point of the novel. (1985:63)

But how does this relate to the first appendix, and how does the first appendix, in turn, relate to the novel as a whole? By including sections from a working draft, Delany is deliberately introducing a writerly element into his text to underline the fictional nature of his project, and to comment, in turn, on the nature of fiction itself. The traditional ending or sense of closure of the novel seems to be disrupted by the appendices, but the appendices are crucial elements in understanding the novel as a whole, and to foregrounding the role of the author as the originator of the text. Spencer states that the function of the first appendix is

to emphasise the fact that this work is fiction, a construct, not a segment of real history whose form is dictated by external events but something entirely controlled by the author. The inclusion of these extra pages serves to undermine the convention of verisimilitude which reigns within the body of *Triton*. This challenge to fictional conventions is what links the two appendices, for the second appendix, in addition to its philosophical and critical functions, also serves to challenge the readers' expectations about the nature of fiction. (1985:64)

Derrida refers to a *parergon* or "supplement outside the work" (1982:55).²

A *parergon* comes against, beside, and in addition to the *ergon*, the work done [*fait*], the fact [*le fait*], the work, but it does not fall to one side, it touches and co-operates within the operation, from a certain outside. Neither simply outside nor simply inside. (1982:54)

This highlights the ambiguous and tenuous relationship of *Triton*'s appendices to the main text: they are simultaneously part of, and removed from, the actual novel, and both attenuate it and extend it. Derrida argues that the question "of the frame, of the limit between inside and outside, must, somewhere in the margins, be constituted

² This may come from Arthur Schopenhauer's *Parerga und Paralipomena* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970).

together" (1982:55).³ By existing in the margins of the novel, the appendices 'frame' the novel in the same way that a painting is usually considered marginal to the painting it encloses. This points to the complex relationship between the appendices and the novel itself. The 'parergonal frame' of the appendices stands out as it is separated from the main text, but simultaneously merges or blends with it as it shares the same text, and forms part of the holistic construction of the novel and the discourse it inscribes. This raises further questions:

Where does the frame take place. Does it take place. Where does it begin.
Where does it end. What is its internal limit. Its external limit. And its surface
between the two limits. (Derrida 1982:63)

The appendices are identified as being separate from the main text as they are labelled as such, with the labels forming an artificial interface between the two textual components. The function of the appendices is clearly not to 'complete' the novel. Rather, they are intended to forestall such an expected closure by opening up the possibilities of the text into unanticipated new directions.

'Appendix A' first appeared in issues 6 and 7/8 of *Foundation* in 1975, and then in a more detailed form as 'Shadows' in *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* in 1977. This complicates their relationship to Delany's fiction even further, as the appendices themselves are hybrid creations stemming from a process of cross-generic discourse. In the appendix to this collection of essays on SF, sub-titled 'Notes on the Language of Science Fiction', Delany comments that the essays "circle about, hover over, and occasionally home in on science fiction" (1977:11). 'Appendix A' in *Triton* can be seen as introducing Delany's general readership to his theoretical thinking about SF, with the former novel itself as a convenient example and testbed of these ideas. Perhaps including such theoretical musings in an appendix tagged on to the end of the novel belies the importance of Delany's ideas on the matter, and their ramifications for the body of his work as a whole, but this sense of playfulness is also very much a part of Delany's theoretical project.

John Clute comments that Delany's most important work "may well be pedagogical" (1995:169). He adds that his "several intensely demanding" works of SF criticism present an account of the nature of the genre that "must be grappled with by

³ Delany highlights the "dazzling opening" of Foucault's *The Order of Things*, which referred to Velázquez's painting *Las Meninas*: "... a painting which, despite its deceptively untroubled surface (unlike the self-referential play rampant in modern works, no such thing *and* its representation are simultaneously shown), is a nearly Escher-like visual construct; a painting of a painter painting a painting ... the several positions collapsed one into the other before a frame containing an image the artist alone could never have observed" (1999:170).

any critic of the field" (1995:169). An important implication of *Triton*'s appendices is that SF, and SF theory, are two sides of the same coin, and should not be separated. As in *Triton*, SF and SF theory must supplement each other. This also relates to criticism and genre in general. The version of 'Appendix A' that appears in *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* is more substantial, and opens with Joanna Russ's contention that "criticism of science fiction cannot possibly look like the criticism we are used to" (1977:51). Delany then elaborates on the nature of the critical function:

... the critic is part of the work's audience. The critic responds to it, selects among those responses and, using them, makes, selectively, a model of the work that may, hopefully, guide, helpfully, the responses of the critic's own audience when they come to the work being modelled. (1977:53).

But what are the implications for the modelling process when the work under critical scrutiny is SF? Delany examines this problematic through questioning whether or not SF "should be taken seriously as literature" (1984:46). The question about the relationship between SF and literature has several implications:

Firstly, there is the presumption that the way literature is traditionally taken seriously is a good thing and has grown up historically as an accumulation of right knowledge in an appropriate response to the innate worthiness of the literary text. This means that what's really being asked here is this: Is science fiction, like literature, innately of value? Second is the much vaguer and more general presumption that science fiction and mundane fiction⁴ work along the same general lines to produce their respective plays of meaning, so that they may be considered in the same way productively. (1984:48)

For Delany, this is the parting of the ways with conventional critical approaches to literature, and their application to SF in particular. Just as he maintains that SF is not about the future, but engages in a dialogue with the present through significant distortions of the contemporary world, so he argues that "the play of meanings, contradictory or otherwise, that makes up the SF text is organised in a way radically different from that of the mundane text" (1984:49). Derrida pointed out that any text, if studied closely enough, will produce contradictory denotations and connotations "that subvert each other, that interfere with each other in such a way that the very concept of 'knowing what the text means' begins to fall apart" (Delany 1984:49). Arriving at an irreducible meaning of a text – be it SF or otherwise – is impossible due to the play of meanings engendered (the appendices of *Triton*

⁴ Delany uses the term 'mundane' fiction to mean the same as 'realist' or 'mainstream' – that is, non-SF.

highlight this dilemma through their intertextual and ambivalent relationship to the novel itself).

The main issue is the structure of such a play of meaning in an SF text, and how it is generated and maintained. In order to answer this question, one has to start with the text or 'textus', as Delany refers to it in 'Appendix A':

Text and textus? Text, of course, comes from the Latin textus, which means 'web'. In modern printing, the 'web' is that great ribbon of paper which, in many presses, takes upwards of an hour to thread from roller to roller throughout the huge machine that embeds ranked rows of inked graphemes upon the 'web', rendering it a text. All the uses of the word 'web', 'weave', 'net', 'matrix' and more, by this circular 'etymology' become entrance points into a textus, which is ordered from all language and language-functions, and upon which the text itself is embedded. (1976:333)

In 'Shadows', Delany defines the problem of critical language as analysing a work to reveal its internal form or underlying structure, with "the implication that what the critic comes up with is somehow more basic than the thing under study" (1977:52). Though novels are clearly seen to be fiction, "the books of criticism about them are not" (1977:52). Delany uses the analogy of a surgeon dissecting a body to remove the skeleton to illustrate the traditional view of criticism as a process with a tangible end result, but works of literature "simply do not have informative insides. There is no skeleton to be removed. They are all surface" (1977:52-3). But this notion itself is contradicted by the concept of the textus as something upon which a text is embedded. This embedding is given depth through the ordering of language – and, indeed, it is language that is the lynchpin for understanding the theoretical underpinnings of SF, and the different context in which these operate in the genre.

In 'Appendix A', Delany writes about naming as a metonymic process, with metonymy being "a figure of speech that replaces the name of one thing with the name of something else closely associated with it" (Baldick 1990:135). Delany comments on the functioning of the metonymic process:

Sometimes it is the pure metonymy of associating an abstract group of letters (or numbers) with a person (or thing), so that it can be recalled (or listed in a metonymic order with other entity names). Frequently, however, it is a more complicated metonymy: old words are drawn from the cultural lexicon to name the new entity (or to rename an old one), as well as to render it (whether old or new) part of the present culture. The relations between entities so named are woven together in patterns far more complicated than any alphabetic or numeric listing can suggest: and the encounter between objects-that-are-words (eg., the name 'science fiction', a critical text on science fiction, a science-fiction text) and processes-made-manifest-by-words (another science-fiction text, another critical text, another name) is as complex as the

constantly dissolving interface between culture and language itself. (Delany 1976:334)

Delany argues that SF has been named through such a metonymic process, with a functional relationship existing between its constitutive metonyms. The 'science' part of the name comprises a varied selection of "bits of technological discourse (real, speculative, or pseudo)" that functions to "redeem various other sentences from the merely metaphorical, or even the meaningless, for denotative description/presentation of incident" (1976:336). As an example, Delany uses a single sentence from Robert Heinlein's novel *Beyond This Horizon*, namely "The door dilated":

... the technological discourse that redeems it – in this case, discourse on the engineering of large-size, iris apertures; and the sociological discourse on what such a technology would suggest about the entire culture – is not explicit in the text. Is it, then, implicit in the textus? All we can say for certain is that, embedded in the textus of anyone who can read the sentence properly, are those emblems by which they could recognise such discourse were it manifested to them in some explicit text. (Delany 1976:336)

Delany argues that this is the functional relation between the metonyms 'science' and 'fiction', which allows SF to generate "images of the impossible ... through the labyrinth of technical possibility" by joining "the repertoire of sentences which may propel textus into text" (1976:337). In the texts that comprise the genre, we perceive an aspect of 'science' and 'fiction', and the interplay between the two leads to the difference that marks SF as a distinct genre. Not only is this fiction different, but it also enhances the potentiality of the genre, which has a "hugely increased repertoire of sentences to draw on" (1976:338).

Delany argues that this means that the structure of SF's fictional field is "notably different from the fictional field of those texts which, by eschewing technological discourse in general, sacrifice this increased range of nontechnological sentences – or at least sacrifice them in the particular, foreground mode" (1976:338). A further implication is that the relationship between foreground and background in SF also differs from ordinary fiction, "because the added sentences in science fiction are primarily foreground sentences" (1976:338). This also refers back to Derrida's concept of the *parergon*, and its complex relationship with the work it frames.

The new sentences available to [SF] not only allow the author to present exceptional, dazzling, or hyperrational data, they also, through their interrelation among themselves and with other, more conventional sentences, create a textus within the text which allows whole panoplies of data to be generated at syntagmatically startling points. (Delany 1976:339)

The final conclusion that Delany draws from SF's intrinsic difference is that the SF enterprise is 'richer' than mundane fiction in terms of its "extended repertoire of sentences, its consequent greater range of possible incident, and through its varied field of rhetorical and syntagmic organisation" (1976:341). However, he notes that the 'web of possibilities' that comprises SF is far from simple, and presents a complex map that has to be learnt 'by exposure' in order to be negotiated:

The contours of the web control the reader's experience of any given s-f text; as the reading of a given s-f text recontours, however slightly, the web itself, that text is absorbed into the genre, judged, remembered, or forgotten. (Delany 1976:341)

A crucial point here is that the language of SF – which, as Delany notes, is "a sub-language of the greater language it is written in" (1981:232) – has to be learnt through exposure and application, which has implications for the nature of reading SF itself, and presupposes a particular relationship between an SF text and its readers. Delany argues that SF is comprised of complex codes, like those for Elizabethan poetry, that are "overdetermined and segue into and mix inextricably with the codes for many other kinds of readings" (1994a:141). Delany's view of the codic conventions of SF starts from the basis of the sentence, in keeping with Noam Chomsky's view that the sentence is the basic unit of language.

A more complex example than the Heinlein quotation is the following fragment explored in *Starboard Wine*: 'Monopole magnet mining operations in the outer asteroid belt'. In order to be fully understood, this "demands a speculative context in science", and readers unfamiliar with the languages of science and SF may be unable to grasp these concepts and appreciate their speculative nature (Samuelson 1994:25). The codic functioning of SF is highlighted in a further discussion of Heinlein's *Starship Troopers* in 'Appendix A'. Delany recounts how Heinlein's description of a mirror reflection and the mention of an ancestor's nationality lead him to infer that the first-person narrator is non-white. The fact that this is only passingly revealed about 250 pages into a 350-page book indicates to Delany that the 'race problem' has been solved. Delany describes the impact of this realisation:

The book as text – as object in the hand and under the eye – became, for a moment, the symbol of that world. In that moment, sign, symbol, image, and discourse collapsed into one, nonverbal experience, catapulted from somewhere beyond the textus (via the text) at the peculiarly powerful trajectory only SF can provide. (1976:339)

As mentioned earlier, the locus or basic unit of this peculiarly SF effect is the sentence, with Delany declaring that he remains, at heart, a "sentence lover", for the

word is merely “a degenerate sentence, a fragmentary utterance, something incomplete” (1994a:134).

Without the sentence, the arena of the word has no walls, no demarcation. No contest takes place. Even historically, I suspect it’s more accurate to think of the sentence as preceding the word. ‘Word’ – or ‘logos’ – is better considered a later, critical tool to analyse, understand, and master some of the rich and dazzling things that go in statements, sentences, utterances The sentence is certainly the better model for the text The word is monolithic. You can’t argue with it. At best it’s got an etymology – ... And an etymology is only a genealogy, not a real history of material pressures and complex influences. (1994a:134-35)

Barthes states that the sentence is the last unit falling within the ambit of linguistics, which “stops at the sentence” (1977:82). The sentence is also a constitutive unit of discourse, which has its own level of organisation, just like linguistics.

Discourse has its units, its rules, its ‘grammar’: beyond the sentence, and though consisting solely of sentences, it must naturally form the object of a second linguistics. (1977:83)

It is important to note that Delany’s analysis of the particular functioning of an SF text, and how it differs from a conventional text, focuses mainly on the basic constitutive unit, the sentence. There may be many sentences in an SF text that are perfectly conventional. Thus what needs to be examined is the discourse of the novel – that is, the manner in which all the constitutive elements, such as words and sentences, function together and interact to form an SF text; in other words, how the SF textus is woven from the web of its components. Delany states further that what interests him most about sentences “is the codes by which we make them”, referring to both readers and writers (1994a:135) – which brings us back to the role of the reader in the SF enterprise. A genre is a way or a protocol of reading, “a structuration of response potential” (1980:176).

A set of texts, over a period of time, to the extent they are different from other texts, produces a way of responding to these texts that is different from the way we respond to texts we might say belong to other genres. Still other texts, intended to be part of the genre, will be written in such a way as that particular protocol allows them to ‘make sense’ or make a richer sense than some other generic protocol would. And still other texts will require that this protocol be slightly shifted in order to produce richer readings. (Or possible weaker ones). Thus the genre changes over the years. (Delany 1980:176)

Here Delany explains that a genre is a protocol, or a way of reading, formed over a historical period through the accumulation of many texts. This accumulation allows the specific generic protocol to be applied to other texts as well, and prevents the genre from being defined simply by a description of the texts themselves. Thus a genre such as SF is not a rigid construct, but is flexible and mutable, and can change over time. A notable implication of SF as a particular generic protocol is that, in order to be able to comprehend the genre itself, "a significant portion of the reading protocol that is the SF genre" (1980:178) has to be learnt. Delany points out that, whereas ordinary fiction engages with the 'real' world, it often happens that the world in an SF story is not a given, but an ever-changing construct.

This means that, in order to be able to 'read' an SF text, the reader must be committed to a more fluid and speculative process that contrasts each sentence of the text to the real world. Thus, through the accumulation of such sentences, "we build up a world in specific dialogue with our present conception of the real" – "for SF, as a genre, is a language" (1980:178). But such a generic protocol is not as lucidly all-encompassing as it sounds, for the very concept of 'reading' complicates the picture even further. Delany points to the view that reading is a transparent medium or interface connecting writing and understanding:

It sees all problems of comprehension as lexically embedded: know the meaning of the word and you know the meaning of the sentence; know the meaning of the sentence and you know the meaning of the text. (Delany 1980:180)

Delany argues that the problem with this view is that 'economic distortions' are at work at every level, be it word, phrase, sentence, sentence cluster, paragraph, topic, or text (1980:180). The implication is that reading "is not transparent and unyielding but rather opaque and responsive" (1980:182). Around every text there exists an interpretative space, and this play of interpretation cannot be denied because "it comes into existence as soon as we recognise the words' meaning" (1980:189). Far from being transparent before the text, reading is our only knowledge of a text (1980:181). An implication of this is that genres themselves have a border of interpretative play around them, and cannot be defined rigidly. For example, attempting to define SF in terms of scientific subject matter is soon confounded by the number of texts that contradict known science, with such SF staples as faster-than-light travel (1980:188).

Delany states that, for SF to maintain "theoretical plurality as an operative value", then the genre must be able to encompass conflicting theories across its range. Delany praises the dialectical freedom of SF, which is akin to its theoretical plurality,

and states that the discourse of SF and the discourse of literature – in terms of responses, reading protocols, and interpretative spaces – can encounter each other without “any significant rupture for literature” (1984:100). This implies a cross-pollination between the two, and underlines the fact that a genre is far from a pure empirical construct. But literature is still the dominant discourse, and thus SF is perceived as a marginal offshoot. Delany has embraced marginality as a mode of theoretical orientation and experimentation in his ongoing SF project. Samuelson notes that Delany’s varied output – from fiction and non-fiction to memoirs and criticism – constantly overlap, and subvert the view of literature as “a privileged mode of writing apart from life” (1994:34).

... [T]he marginality of this genre offering alternatives to the present seems intimately connected for him with the marginality of the deprived. In a marginal genre, ruled by commercial concerns, Delany himself occupies a marginal position, as a gay black man driven by feminist, linguistic, and Marxist aesthetic concerns. ... Delany seems to seek an ideal (para-)literature in which considerations of race and sexual preference are inclusive rather than exclusive, and in which science and technology take unexpected turns In the long run, gaining public attention slowly and through aesthetic and intellectual values is a more subversive tactic than open confrontation (1994:34-5)

Delany comments that “writers are not assigned their genres by God”, and that the notion of SF being more tolerant of the marginal – in that “it recognises the problems of life on the edges and welcomes them with insight and compassion” – could just be “a somewhat naïve anthropomorphism” (1987b:151). However, in the same essay Delany remarks that “certainly one thing that must have drawn me to SF in the first place was a propensity for working in despised genres” (1987b:154). The notion of ‘despised genres’ is explored further in the ‘Tale of Plagues and Carnivals’, the third part of *Flight From Nevèryon* (1989), itself the third volume of the four-part Nevèryon sequence. Delany’s contention that SF does not deal with the future seems to have reached its logical progression in Nevèryon, set in some magical, distant past at the cusp of civilisation’s birth.

In the same way that SF is marginal to literature, so does the Nevèryon sequence form part of a genre that is marginal to SF itself, namely the subcategory of sword-and-sorcery (S&S), which Delany describes as “SF’s despised younger cousin” (1987b:154). SF’s relationship to S&S is akin to the way the former itself is viewed by the larger literary establishment: as being populist, superficial, and therefore not worthy of any critical consideration or attention. In explaining why he focused on S&S for a writing project that took ten years, and saw Delany veering markedly from

his SF oeuvre, his line of reasoning, however, is basically the same as the one he used to justify himself taking up the SF cudgel in the first place:

What's intriguing about sword-and-sorcery is that it takes place in an a-specific, idealised past⁵ This means whatever happens in this vision of the past that may have something to do with us today doesn't filter through any recognisable historical events ... it lets you look at the impact of certain cross-cultural concepts that nevertheless are often not given the same kind of spotlight in historical novels, concepts (like money, writing, weaving, or any early technological advances ...) that go so far in over-determining the structure of the historical biggies: a war, a change of government, a large migration from country to city.

What makes S&S historically a-specific also makes it rather anachronistic And because it's all supposed to be happening at an unknown time and place, there there be dragons! (Delany 1987b:155)

Neveryon is a speculative endeavour that, like SF, is in dialogue with the present, but through an "historic imaginative space" and a "paraliterary object priority", shared with SF, that allows Delany to "play with notions about how things-in-the-world, including the socially contoured organisation of people's psyches, may be functioning in such correspondences" (1987b:155). Neveryon's link with SF is amplified further when Delany states that the overall plan or model for the sequence has been the 'series stories' that dominated SF in the 1930s and 1940s, such as Clifford Simak's *City*, Robert Heinlein's 'Future History', and Isaac Asimov's *Foundation* sequence (1987b:156). The flexibility of the series is that it can accommodate short stories, bulky novels, and novellas with equal ease, and provides the writer the opportunity to revisit and rethink certain parts of the series whenever he or she wants to.

'The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals' has a far more complex function in the Neveryon sequence as a whole than simply restating or clarifying earlier ideas. Taking up roughly half of *Flight From Neveryon*'s 480 pages, it is written in the form of numbered journal entries that intersperse two divergent stories: an account of a mysterious plague that descends upon Kolhari, and an account of New York in the early 1980s at the advent of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. In addition, Delany offers personal comment, reminiscences, autobiography and criticism. The central sequence of the novella is an account by the Master of how he traversed Neveryon in his youth, eventually reached its boundary, but was unable to cross over. There are two other instances in the novella where Kolhari and New York do, indeed, merge.

Delany recomplicates the double marginality of the Neveryon sequence – that is, its relationship to SF, and SF's relationship to literature as a whole – in this

⁵ As opposed to an a-specific, idealised future of SF ...

complex novella, the main theme of which is the transgression of boundaries, be they physical borders on a map, the moral restrictions imposed by institutionalised society, or the limits of a genre. Delany argues that a genre “is almost always employed with ideological abuse” (1980:182), adding that he distrusts the notion of a genre as a discursive space in which an author can exercise unrestricted literary freedom:

Basically the idea that a genre, or even an age or epoch, gives a freedom (or, indeed, imposes restraints) that any old writer, once he or she plops down in the middle of it, can turn around and exploit wonderfully (or be totally stymied by) is one I’ve heard before – and distrust. (Delany 1987b:151)

Just as Delany warns against seeing reading as a transparent interface between writing and understanding, so does he warn against seeing genre itself as a transparent medium in which a collection of texts nestle. ‘The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals’, in its context as part of a paraliterary genre, introduces even greater marginality by disrupting and refracting the question and nature of genre itself. It does this by examining the “interpenetrations and speciation of the paraliterary genres of science fiction and fantasy” (1987:65). By introducing elements of autobiography and criticism, Delany indicates that his concern is the functioning of genre in general. The relationship between SF and S&S is a reflection of this larger concern, and the particular form of ‘speciation’ that Delany attempts in the novella can be said to produce a different type of genre.

The point is not so much the difference between the novella and SF and S&S, but that genre itself is endlessly mutable and flexible. Delany uses this reproductive and regenerative characteristic of genre to create a collage of disparate genres in the novella that, as a whole, partakes of the nature of genre itself, as well as at, the same time, being a distinctive marginal genre all unto its own. This might sound like a chaotic situation where all boundaries break down, and transgression is the only stable element. But it is transformed into a rich seedbed for sowing thoughts about the nature of genre itself, and how genres function and are constituted:

We get a new genre when two old genres, joining, loose their membranous separation, mix and interpenetrate on some intimate genetic level, which results in a spurt of growth, multiplication, and the separation of modes, some of which, against an economic and social environment supportive enough, are able to flourish and become genres. (1987:68)⁶

Delany notes that genre marks have a particular problematic within the ‘paraliterary precincts’ of SF and fantasy. Derrida links the question of genre to the question of

⁶ This can also be termed genre hybridisation.

law, as a genre is defined and maintained by a particular set of rules. In order to understand what genre is, one has to focus on the explicit and implicit rules by which it functions, and in turn what external influences and factors impact on those rules. Derrida ponders the 'question of genre' as reflecting on such larger issues as law and classification:

The question of genre – literary genre but also gender, genus, and taxonomy more generally – brings with it the question of law, since it implies an institutionalised classification, an enforceable principle of non-contamination and non-contradiction. But genre always potentially exceeds the boundaries that bring it into being, for a member of a genre always signals its membership by an explicit or implicit mark ... (Derrida 1992b:221)

Derrida begins with what seems to be an unequivocal statement: "Ne pas mêler les genres", translated as "Genres are not to be mixed" – however, the French phrase can be translated as an infinitive or an imperative, an undecidability that Derrida capitalises on (1992b:223). Any attempt to conceive of the word 'genre' immediately poses a limit, with its attendant norms and interdictions. This means that, in attempting to put a framework around the concept of genre, one is obliged automatically to exclude everything external to the concept, or that which might contaminate or influence it.

Thus, as soon as genre announces itself, one must respect a norm, one must not cross a line of demarcation, one must not risk impurity, anomaly or monstrosity. (1992b:225)

Delany's stated intention in the *Neveryon* sequence is to engage in a dialogue with a particular subcategory of SF, namely S&S. In 'The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals', Delany's aim is not only to subvert the generic conventions or reading protocol of S&S, but to throw a critical light on the nature of genre itself. What do we make of Derrida's contention that genres are not to be mixed in the face of a novella that actively ruptures several generic categories and makes them flow together into a single new reading protocol that nevertheless partakes of all the identities of the individual genres it encompasses? Derrida's argument anticipates such an eventuality:

What if there were, lodged within the heart of the law itself, a law of impurity or a principle of contamination? And suppose the condition for the possibility of the law were the a priori of a counter-law, an axiom of impossibility that would confound its sense, order and reason? (1992b:225)

Delany argues that what interests him lies “beyond the margin to what is ‘outside of literature and art’” (1987:65), which can be understood as implying such paraliterary genres as SF and S&S. This can be understood as implying that “every text participates in one or several genres” (Delany 1987:63), but that such participation does not equate to belonging. This is not due to “an abundant overflowing or a free, anarchic and unclassifiable productivity, but because of the trait of participation itself, because of the effect of the code and the generic mark” (1987:63-4). Delany quotes Joanna Russ’s contention that “worrying about the purity of the genres is like worrying about the purity of the races” (1987:64), implying that not only is such an attempt futile, but that it is to commit to a rigid and shortsighted classification that stunts the potentiality and growth of genre. What, exactly, is Derrida’s ‘generic mark’? Delany states that it is

... a mark that no text escapes, implicitly or explicitly, and is yet a mark always outside the text, not a part of it – such as the designations ‘science fiction’ or ‘fantasy’ on the book spine or cover – a mark that codifies the text on bookstore shelf or under hand, calling into play the codes and reading protocols by which the texts become readable. (1987:65)

Derrida argues that the edge of a text is the title, and it is this edge that allows us to approach a text as a distinct entity (1979:81). But the edge of a text is also a “running border” – comprising the “supposed end and beginning of a work, the unity of a corpus, the title, the margins, the signatures, the referential realm outside the frame” (1979:83). This leads to a situation of ‘overrun’ that disrupts the boundaries and divisions encompassed by the notion of a ‘text’. Derrida argues that a ‘text’ can only be referred to as such for strategic reasons, as it is

henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it ... (1979:84)

Barthes argues that, although the text is an object, it cannot be ‘computed’ or properly delineated because it is a “methodological field” and exists in a “process of demonstration”, speaking according to, or against, various rules. The text is “held in language”, and can only be said to exist in a “movement of a discourse” (1977:157). He defines a ‘work’ as the physical representation of a text, for example a book on a library shelf. The defining characteristic of a text, or its “constitutive movement”, is that of

... cutting across (in particular, it can cut across the work, across several works). ... it cannot be contained in a hierarchy, even in a simple division of genres If the Text poses problems of classification (which is furthermore one of its 'social' functions), this is because it always involves a certain experience of limits (1977:156)

Barthes continues that a text, which "practises the infinite deferment of the signified", is only approached and experienced in response to the sign, and therefore a text is, by its very nature, "radically symbolic". It generates the "perpetual signified" through a play of deferred meaning in the "field" of the text. This is done not according "to an organic process of maturation or a hermeneutic course of deepening investigation, but, rather, according to a serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations" (1977:158).

The idea of structure embodied in a text is as ambivalent a notion as the structure of language – that is, it is "a system with neither close nor centre" (Barthes 1977:159). Furthermore, a text has a plurality of meaning, which does not imply more than one meaning, but rather that the meaning of the text is itself irreducible. This leads Barthes to conclude that a text is a 'plurality':

The Text is not a co-existence of meanings but a passage, an overcrossing; thus it answers not to an interpretation, even a liberal one, but to an explosion, a dissemination. The plural of the Text depends, that is, not on the ambiguity of its contents but on what might be called the stereographic plurality of its weave of signifiers (etymologically, the text is a tissue, a woven fabric). (1977:159)

This is akin to Delany's notion of the textus as a web. What web, then, does he weave in 'The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals'? The first point of note is the extra-textual boundaries that enclose the novella: it is the third part of a novel, which itself is part three of an overarching series or sequence of novels and stories. This structure seems to impose a logical progression and order.

The next most obvious boundary is the subtitle ('Some Informal Remarks toward the Modular Calculus, Part Five'), which is linked to, and thus forms an integral part of, the main title by dint of a comma and the word 'or', but is printed in smaller type a few spaces down to indicate its lesser, or lower, status. The two titles are disparate, and the use of the linking word 'or' seems to indicate an ambivalence on the part of the author. Once again, 'part five' seems to indicate a sense of logical order, and a hint of a larger plan. But the reader who is unfamiliar with Delany's work might be intimidated that he or she is only approaching the larger text at part five, while the reader who is familiar with Delany will be puzzled equally by the nature

and function of the modular calculus, which runs a gamut of genres and textual forms from *Triton* to the *Neveryon* sequence.

In addition, the chatty colloquialism of the phrase ‘some informal remarks’ sits uncomfortably with the imputed high-brow nature of the ‘modular calculus’. Apart from the subtitle, the latter is never referred to in the novella again. Thus its reference and ultimate meaning is intertextual – that is, it can only be properly understood as a signified by referring to other texts. Thus from the outset Delany indicates the fluidity of the boundary of his text, and the fact that it can be recrossed. The modular calculus is first encountered in the subtitle to *Triton* itself, and then in the subtitle to ‘Appendix B’. Its inclusion in the titles, which are the primary signifieds of the text, seems to lend it veracity as a concept. This view is recomplicated when the reader learns that it is part of a fictional statistical modelling process in the novel called ‘metallogic’.

‘Appendix B’ provides some background detail on its inventor and main proponent, Ashima Slade, who himself does not appear in the novel as a character. It also includes some extracts from lectures he gave on the modular calculus. It is only in *Return to Neveryon* that Delany confronts directly the question of what the modular calculus actually is, stating that – if it were to exist – it would comprise a “fixed set of algorithms” to produce a template. The defining problematic of the modular calculus is “how do we know when we have a model of a situation; and how do we tell what kind of model it is?” (1989c:380).⁷ ‘Some Informal Remarks toward the Modular Calculus’, explains Delany, are a model of a system but, although the ‘remarks’ are clearly numbered from *Triton* onwards, from part one to part five, it is unclear what the modular calculus actually includes and excludes.

Delany adds “that any rich system tends to function through an interchange between what is inside the system and what is outside the system (with what is outside frequently fuelling the system proper)” [1989c:387]. Thus the modular calculus is a point of convergence for several of Delany’s most important themes: models and systems, and their boundaries or margins. Both *Triton* and *Neveryon* are ‘model’ societies – one projected into the future, and the other reclaimed from the past. Both are refractions and reflections of our existing society, and form a dialogue or discourse in relation to it. Spencer adds that the *Triton* appendices also function to indicate that the novel is a work of fiction or a construct, “not a segment of real history whose form is dictated by external events but something entirely controlled by the author” (1985:64). In *Neveryon*, however, even the distinction between the modelled history of a text and the real history preceding it is blurred, for the

⁷ Delany answers his own question, and says it “is a model of late twentieth-century (mostly urban) America” (1989c:380). America, of course, is the quintessential discursive ‘utopia’.

ostensible basis of the entire series is a 900-word, neolithic narrative fragment known as the Culhar Fragment or Kolhare Text.⁸

In an appendix to the first volume, *Tales of Nevèrÿon*, SL Kermit writes how the text was translated and reclaimed for modern times by K Leslie Steiner, a black female theoretical mathematician. While this is entirely fictional, with both Kermit and Steiner aliases for Delany himself, Spencer states that the real events on which the fiction is modelled are the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the real archaeologists and linguists Schliemann and Ventrìs (Spencer 1985:84). In this way the relationship between the history of the text and the history of the real world is recomplicated even further. This appendix is also part of the modular calculus. In 'The Culhar Correspondence', an appendix to volume two, *Nevèrÿona*, Delany – in the guise of Kermit, writing ostensibly from "a dig in the desert" (1985:89) – responds to criticism from real academic Charles Hoequist. Such obfuscation obviously complicates the 'veracity' of the Nevèrÿon sequence?

In 'The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals', Delany states that the entire sequence, "from first tale to last", is "a document of our times ... and a carefully prepared one, too" (1989b:322). Towards the end of the novella, Kermit and Leslie debate the notion of the sequence as a social document. The criticism is serious and sustained, but the fact that the debate is engendered by two fictional personas of the author himself further recrosses the boundary between fiction and 'reality'. 'The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals' is preceded by three quotations that serve to signpost integral themes that are interwoven throughout the novella. Like the quotations used in *Triton*, these are of an academic nature, signifying that Delany is extending the traditional S&S model. As with *Triton*, the model that Delany constructs in Nevèrÿon is, at the same time, a comment on the modelling process itself. As Ashima Slade explains in 'Appendix B', the central problematic of the modular calculus is "how can one relational system model another?" (1989b:356). The three quotations are as follows:

Ours, too, is an age of allegoresis ...
 –Allen Mandelbaum

⁸ Foucault's following comment on history in his introduction to *The Archaeology of Knowledge* are appropriate: "... ever since a discipline such as history has existed, documents have been used, questioned, and have given rise to questions; scholars have asked not only what these documents meant, but also whether they were telling the truth, and by what right they could claim to be doing so, whether they were sincere or deliberately misleading, well informed or ignorant, authentic or tampered with. But each of these questions, and all this critical concern, pointed to one and the same end: the reconstitution, on the basis of what the documents say, and sometimes merely hint at, of the past from which they emanate and which has now disappeared behind them; the document was always treated as the language of a voice since reduced to silence, its fragile, but possibly decipherable *trace*. Now ... history ... has taken as its primary task, not the interpretation of the document, nor the attempt to decide whether it is telling the truth or what is its expressive value, but to work on it from within and to develop it" ('Post-structuralism' 1999).

Inferno, Introduction

'If you believe that,' the tutor remarked, 'you'd believe anything! No, it wasn't like that at all! ...'

–Joanna Russ

Extra(Ordinary) People

Does this amount to saying that the master's place remains empty, it is not so much the result of his own passing as that of a growing obliteration of the meaning of his work? To convince ourselves of this we have only to ascertain what is going on in the place he vacated.

–Jacques Lacan

The Function of Language in Psychoanalysis (Delany 1989b:237)

It is difficult to infer from the first quotation whether the 'age' referred to is that of Nevèryon, our world itself, or both. Allegory is "a story or visual image with a second distinct meaning partially hidden behind its literal or visible meaning" (Baldick 1990:5), and thus 'allegoresis' can be taken to mean the process by which allegory functions, or is employed. The process can be seen to function in the novella in that the foregrounded subject matter is the overarching concern of the entire sequence: the mysterious and magical realm of Nevèryon itself.

The plot concerns how the capital, Kolhari, is struck by a devastating plague. Interspersed with this is a story of New York in the early decades of the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Clearly, HIV/AIDS is the "second distinct meaning" inferred by the concept of allegory. But there is a further hidden meaning that underpins both stories: the modelling process itself. Nevèryon is the 'false' representation, while the New York account is the privileged discourse as it is based on 'true' events. However, both are models of representation, and they differ in their degrees of removal from that real world. The boundaries separating the two models become permeable as events are interwoven, until the two finally mix and merge, which not only challenges the dominance of the main discourse, but topples it from its throne of privileged representation.

The difficulties associated with fictional representation, especially of 'true' events, is indicated by the second quotation, which reveals that meaning is not transcendent and unified, but is instead plural and dispersed. The third quotation grapples with the nature of discourse itself, and the role that the author – the 'master' referred to (there is also a character in the novella called the Master) – plays in defining the boundaries or parameters of his text. Delany's relationship to his discourse is complicated and multilayered: he is author and originator, character and observer, and reader and consumer.

The novella begins with Delany's description of "a contemporary Bridge of Lost Desire" in New York, which he states is "on -th Street, just beyond Ninth Avenue" (1989b:239). Here the author demands a familiarity with the symbolic landscape of Nevèryon, for the Bridge is an area in the Old Market of Kolhari where prostitutes ply their trade. The bridge is a symbol of the vital flow of trade and influence between the old and new markets of the port city and, in the context of 'The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals', conjured up right at the beginning and right at the end, is also a symbol of the link between that ancient realm and the world of New York, and becomes the symbolic means by which the two worlds finally merge.⁹ The novella opens on a gritty note of plague, with this bridge being where one of the many main characters, Joey, "beside the towering garbage pile beneath it, ... smelled the first of the corpses" (1989b:240). It is interesting to note that, given the realism of this opening, Delany does not pinpoint the exact location of the bridge, as if '-th Street' is meant to indicate the psychological space or frame of discourse in which Nevèryon functions.

Though the novella starts in New York, seeming to foreground this strand of the narrative as the primary discourse, Delany's reference to a contemporary equivalent of a Nevèryon landmark seems to indicate that both worlds are equally tangible. It is also a succinct example of the modelling process, for the version of the bridge in New York can be said to represent the Bridge of Lost Desire in Kolhari, though it seems clear that it could be the other way round as well: "except for ... twentieth-century detail, it has the air of a prehistoric structure" (1989b:239). Another interesting aspect of the opening is that it is numbered '1.', with each subsequent 'entry' numbered, as if the novella were a journal. The numbered sequence progresses sequentially, with Delany obviously using simple arithmetical progression, but what is unclear is how he decides on the length of each individual segment. Thus the overall effect of the opening of the novella is to hint at the Nevèryon/New York dichotomy, which will be made more explicit as the novella progresses, representing a boundary that will ultimately be crossed – a boundary of genre, reader/author function, and textual possibility.

The next entry, marked '2.1', is a vignette of Nevèryon, but this is not explicitly referred to. Instead the reader has to deduce the transition from the use of the phrases 'kitchen girl', 'servant woman' and 'Lord Vanar', who is ill from some mysterious illness. S&S is often characterised by a primitive class structure, as a symbol of it being located in some inchoate form of the past, and thus it is possible to attach a generic label to the vignette. But the difference in Nevèryon, and a signpost

⁹ New York City, of course, is itself a city of bridges.

of Delany's interest in the marginal, is that the servants are not just background extras, but participate actively in the narrative. The next entry, '2.2', is a discourse on Susan Sontag's comment in *Illness as Metaphor* that "diseases should not become social metaphors" (1989b:240). It is also the first time that Aids is mentioned in the novella, which causes the reader to re-evaluate the previous two entries in light of this new information.

It seems that, with Sontag's statement, Delany is subverting his narrative strategy, the ostensible aim of which is to take the societal models of Nevèryon and New York, and introduce a disruptive external element in the form of a plague or disease, and examine how the models cope with the intrusion or are altered by it. But Sontag's comment warns precisely against this process of turning a disease like Aids into an element of allegoresis.

When diseases generate such metaphors, the host of misconceptions and downright superstitions that come from taking them literally (misconceptions that, indeed, often determine the metaphors themselves in a system of reciprocal stabilisation) makes it impossible, both psychologically and socially – both in terms of how you feel and how others, with their feelings, treat you – to 'have the disease' in a 'healthy' manner.

'Dis-ease.' Non-easiness. Difficulty. ...

Metaphors fight each other. They also adjust one another. (Delany 1989b:241)

This metaphoric process of conflict and adjustment refers to the production of meaning from sign systems, or semiotics. Delany explains that, in the third and fourth volumes (so far the last of the sequence), the tales embrace "a more general semiology", described by Roland Barthes as:

'the labour that collects the impurities of language, the wastes of linguistics, the immediate corruption of any message: nothing less than the desires, fears, expressions, intimidations, advances, blandishments, protests, excuses, aggressions and melodies of which active language is made.' This idea of semiology as the excess, the leftover, the supplement of linguistics brings us round to Jacques Derrida's logic of the supplement, without which semiology and, indeed, poststructuralism, in general would be hugely impoverished. (1987b:355)

Delany states that it was his intention to end the sequence with 'The Game of Time and Pain', but in the particular system of signs or signification circumscribed by the Nevèryon sequence, 'The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals' can be seen as the semiological notion of the excess or leftover, the spillage from the overarching

discourse. In explaining this structuralist interpretation of a text, Hugh J. Silverman comments that it can be seen as “an open field participating in the proliferation of sign production” (1994:29):

... the text is an open system of signs with plural meanings. The plurality of meaning arises because the semiological notion of signification (based on the act or process of a signifier combined with a signified) has been broken open by the stress on the chain of signifiers. The signifying chain produces multiple significations ... (1994:31)

However, Julia Kristeva notes that Saussure indicated originally that semiology could not be an abstract science like logic and linguistics, “for the semiotic universe is the vast realm of the social” (1989:297). Therefore semiotics draws on the gamut of human sciences, as it has “to devise for itself a theory of signification before it could formalise the systems it wanted to tackle”, implying that the “science of the sign would thus become inseparable from a theory of signification and knowledge” (1989:297). In the Nevèryon sequence, Delany constructs a particular sign system based on the S&S template, which is a system of signification in its own right, as well as commenting on the process by which such systems are formulated.

The three opening entries of the novella reveal its basic structure: interspersed accounts of New York and Nevèryon, with the boundary between these crossed further by writerly discourse on the part of the author. Delany also crosses the boundary separating the novella from the rest of the sequence, thereby indicating that its separate elements are not isolated components, but part of a greater signifying system. This also raises such questions as how do the particular sign systems of SF and S&S, for example, generate their particular meanings?

The fourth entry, ‘2.3’, introduces one of the most important characters in the novella, simply referred to as the Master (1989b:241), who is a symbol of the author and the authority he exerts over the text (and his continuing influence, even though he is, in a sense, absent from his own work), to the moral and institutional authority that underpins the society of Nevèryon. As Delany comments in *Return to Nevèryon*:

The Nevèryon series takes place at the edge of the shadow of the late French psychiatrist Jacques Lacan, from the slaves who have vacated the collars in the first pages of the first tale (gone to what manumissions, executions, or other collars, the child Gorgik never knows, though the rest of his life can be looked at as an attempt to find out) to the series of vanished authorities and their empty citadels, such as Lord Aldamir and his castle: the Dead father, the Absent father, the Name of the Law. (Delany 1989c:356)

The point is that these authorities are not vanished, for the law they represent is part of the institutional fabric of society; they are an integral element of the semiotic system by which society itself is signified. Delany writes how, "pondering questions of disease, magic and power, the Master sat alone" (1989b:243) – but the Master is never alone; he is the centre of an intricate web of power relations. The 'absence' that Delany refers to is also the referential space in which signification takes place, such as the "conceptual turbulence" of Aids as metaphor (1989b:243), especially with the initial connotations of labelling the disease the 'gay plague'. Clearly the 'plague' in the title of the novella refers to this connotation, but the plague that decimates Kolhari, though reminiscent of Aids in that it strikes the homosexual population first, does not have the same signifiatory or semiotic baggage that HIV/AIDS has been burdened with.

The Kolhari plague can be seen as a model for the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and Delany contrasts this with the progress of the disease's conceptual and metaphorical definition in our own time, and thereby suggests that our model for assimilating the HIV/AIDS epidemic is just that – a model – and can be transformed: "[P]erhaps the job is to find a better metaphor and elaborate it well enough to help stabilise" the system of signification by which it is given meaning (1989b:244). This refers back to the idea that language stabilises social interaction, thereby underpinning the way that society is constituted. Delany gives the reader a glimpse of life in Kolhari through a series of character vignettes, and follows each with a brief note on the psychological motivations for that particular character. Each of these interludes begins similarly – "if a mid-twentieth century orthodox Freudian" – as if to indicate that they are all part of some greater critical discourse underpinning the novella.

This transgresses the boundary between the author and the text, with the author taking over the critical function normally reserved for those interpreting the text. It also crosses the boundary between the author and the textual characters, for the added analysis fleshes out the characters in a manner suggesting that they are fully-rounded autonomous entities. Finally, it blurs the boundary enfolding the novella within the S&S fold by applying twentieth-century theory to a genre often concerned with an unspecified historical past, precisely so that it can jettison the shackles of the present and invent its own history. By using Freudian models to map out the borders of his own characters, Delany suggests that the entire model of *Nevèryon* can be used as a litmus test for the present, as these are contemporary psychological theories applied to a mythical past. The theories he suggests are as follows: penis envy can explain Nari's "girlish desire for a son", and sublimation can explain her "new success in her work" (1989b:251); and repressed homosexuality "as the basic force

behind civilisation” with reference to Zadyuk (1989b:254). In terms of Pheron, Delany imagines his response to the above theories to be as follows:

‘The only thing is, *I* envy them too. And I’ve *got* one. Nor is it small. And heaven knows, I don’t sublimate. I go right for it!’

And if the orthodox Freudian went on to present the theory of ‘repressed homosexuality’ as the basic force behind civilisation, Pheron’s comment would most likely have been:

‘But *what* makes you think it’s repressed?’ (Delany 1989b:256)

Interestingly, in each instance Delany himself states that such an analysis is false, which serves to open up, rather than limit, the interpretative space his characters inhabit. In the case of Pheron, Delany suggests that such an interpretative space is also an absence of meaning, a distance between the author and his creation, or a break in the articulation of his own discourse. He is writing about the past – and an imagined past, at that – but is rooted firmly in the present, which raises questions about the modelling function of *Neveryon* itself. Can it truly be a representative alternative model that can be projected on to the present to see where the borders overlap or diverge, or is it merely an incomplete or imperfect copy of the dominant model, namely our own society?

4.32 There is something incomplete about Pheron. (Since there is no Pheron, since he exists only as words, their sounds and associated images, be certain of it: I have left it out). My job is, then, in the course of this experiment, to find this incompleteness, to fill it in, to make him whole.

But at this point, however, there’s a real question where to look for the material: in the past? in the future? on the roaring shore where imagination swells and breaks? in the pale, hot sands of intellection? in the evanescent construct of the here and now – that reality always gone in a blink that is nevertheless forever making history? (Delany 1989b:256)

This creates added intimacy between the reader and the author, for the latter has privileged the former with an insight into the dynamics of the creative process itself. It also serves to jolt the reader into an awareness that the text is a constructed document. It is far more than the physical object it encompasses, the main boundary of which is circumscribed by the cover, but is a web of discourse intertwined with the present. In the passage following the above, Delany projects his doubts and worries about the text on to the Master worrying about Toplin, one of his students. This indicates that the Master is a representation of the author function. Speculating about presenting the Master with any of Freud’s concepts, Delany states that the Master “has too many carefully worked up theories of his own” (1989b:258). The final “reception of theory” is applied to a “nameless old servant” who

... thought of Lord Vanar and, as an aged woman might at that time, pondered magic, disease, power, and felt ...

An absence? She noted somehow it was hers. No. It's been inflicted on you by ...

That's me, of course, protesting ineffectually across the ages. But my inability to reach her on that morning, millennia ago, only confronts me with my own failings, incompletions, absences. (Delany 1989b:258-59)

The sense of intimacy between reader and author, and the complicated interrelationship both share with the text, is heightened further by the autobiographical account that follows the above. Delany recounts his daughter's tenth birthday, which coincided with a final rewrite of 'The Tale of Fog and Granite', and marvels at the inner life of this "micro person" – "a life which I've always known was there, wanted to be there, but, as a parent, I so rarely catch signs of" (1989b:261). He remarks that it is odd that such simple domestic moments are denied Zadyuk and Nari "by an offstage quirk of biology", but notes that these quirks are precisely what the novella is about.

Odd also that, ten years ago, just before my daughter's birth, when I began the Neveryon series, I wouldn't have thought it odd in the least. (Delany 1989b:262)

Given the critical attention focused on Delany, and the attendant scrutiny of his private life, the fact that he is homosexual has been used to justify or explain his pursuit of the marginal. However, until the publication of his autobiography, few readers were aware that Delany was, indeed, married at one stage, and has a daughter. Thus, just as Delany uses the theoretical musings on the motivations of his characters to deepen the reader's understanding of them, so does he use this brief autobiographical interlude to transform the reader's perception of himself as an ordinary individual, and not as Delany the respected critic, writer and homosexual, who in a sense has become a persona in his own theoretical and fictional pursuits. This is the basic narrative strategy that Delany follows in the novella: to reveal differing, and sometimes opposing, levels of meaning, which are then subverted or recomplicated by additional layers, so that no single meaning is legitimized.¹⁰

¹⁰ This is what Mikhail Bakhtin refers to as 'heteroglossia' in *The Dialogic Imagination*: "The novel orchestrates all its themes, the totality of objects and ideas depicted and expressed in it, by means of the social diversity of speech types and by differentiating individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speeches of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel ..." (Bakhtin 2001). In *Voprosy literatury i estetiki*, Bakhtin writes: "Languages of heteroglossia, like mirrors that face each other, each of which in its own way reflects a little piece, a tiny corner of the world, force us to guess at and grasp behind their interreflecting aspects for a world that is broader,

However, the autobiographical interlude adds another layer, especially Delany's comments on procrastinating about an editorial deadline, and the fact that he began the Nevèryon sequence ten years ago.

In that time, the series – which in a sense is about the construction of history itself – has garnered its own publishing history. Like his daughter and the characters in the novella, the series has its own inner life, absences, and incompletions when conceived of as a whole. On the most basic level, Delany is the 'father' of the text. But this implies a hierarchical relationship between author and work, when in fact the creative process is indeed more diffuse and even ephemeral. The title of this third volume, *Flight from Nevèryon*, indicates a desire to escape from the boundaries of this fictional realm, which over the course of a decade has generated a critical weight akin to a gravity well around a star – attracting all to its light, but keeping it there. Thus an important function of 'The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals' is to shatter such a static concept of history as an accumulative process, and to subvert the sign system that Nevèryon itself has put in place in order to critique the general sign system of S&S.

But as Norema notes: "It is not that easy to flee ..." (Delany 1989b:297). This is also what the Master discovers when, at the age of 19, he decides to abandon his title, which is what keeps him shackled to a particular social role, as well as mediating society's perception of himself. However, he discovers that this "simple act of unnam[ing]" merely lowers the defenses around the interpretative space created by that very title, starting a fable that is perpetuated "quite apart" from any intervention of the Master himself.

Oh, there've been moments when my reputation seemed a light rippling out into darkness, myself its central flame. More often, however, it's some gnarled, preposterous monster, inhabiting my city with me, whom I've never met, but whom, for incomprehensible reasons, people who should know better still mistake for me. It goes about, parodying with misquotation, mocking me with stupidities and homilies, giving my actions false motives... (Delany 1989b:266)

The Master is like the author who, over the course of a career, has generated an impression with readers that sometimes bears little resemblance to the living writer in question. In Delany's case, however, he parodies this notion of the writer as a victim of his own text by creating his own fictional personas, such as Steiner and Kermit,

more multi-levelled and multi-horizoned than would be available to one language, one mirror" (Bakhtin 2001a). Perhaps this is what Delany means when he refers to the 'mirrors of night' in *The Mad Man* – heteroglossic interfaces that dialogise the world (1994b:431).

and inserting himself in his own text as a character. However, this strategy could also be an elaborate form of camouflage, for one is never sure who the 'real' Delany is.¹¹

Similarly, the elaborate intertextual play in the novella means that the reader has to redefine his or her generic expectations constantly, for Nevèryon treats the boundary between S&S and literature as being totally malleable, and thus forces the reader to come to terms with certain things that normally lie outside the ambit of this particular genre. The aim is not only to broaden the generic scope, but to highlight the mechanisms and conventions by which genre functions, and thereby to shatter the double boundary of S&S: as a subcategory of SF which, in turn, is a paraliterary genre of literature itself.

An example of this strategy is when Delany inserts a quotation by Walter Benjamin from 'The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire':

'The time is not distant when it will be understood that a literature which refuses to make its way in brotherly concord with science and philosophy is a murderous, suicidal literature.' (1989b:267)

The effect of this is not so much to disrupt the narrative flow – that is, to alter its progress from a readerly to a writerly discourse – but rather to refract the narrative and to point out to the reader larger issues and concerns that are touched upon. In other words, Delany aims to expand the reader's awareness beyond the potentially limiting confines of a particular genre itself. Benjamin's notion of a "brotherly concord" of literature suggests a utopian situation where the gamut of genres interrelate to form a cohesive whole, and where such diverse subjects as science and philosophy complement each other. Such an example of an 'ideal' genre is surely SF itself, where the 'hard' technological trappings of the modern world are harnessed to the 'softer' concerns of the social sciences to produce a dialogue or discourse with the present in the form of a template or model that can illuminate our own society.

S&S adds to this potentiality by introducing the concept of history as a fluid *tabula rasa* on which both the past and the future are transcribed in service of the present. Later on Delany notes that the meaning of the Benjamin quotation is altered when its context changes from, for example, paraliterature to scientific literary naturalism. In the former instance the quotation "dialogises heatedly with the text" – that is, it is so anomalous in this specific context that it interrupts the narrative – while in the latter it is simply part of the plot, and "merely approves or condemns the specific narrative tropes" (1989b:275). This serves to illustrate Delany's notion of SF

¹¹ How can the reader verify any biographical information offered by the author, when memory is as elusive as the shimmer of light in water?

as a way of reading, meaning that the sentences comprising it have to be interpreted in a specific manner in order to decode the information giving it a peculiarly SF slant.

Delany recounts how the Master “took off on a trip from one end of Nevèryona to the other” (1989b:267), which is a metaphor for what Delany as author has been doing in the Nevèryona sequence as a whole: using words to map his fictional realm from one end to the other. Significantly, in ‘The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals’, the Master does attempt to move “beyond our odd and undefinable border” (1989b:409), which marks the edge of Delany’s fictional enterprise – an undefinable, amorphous edge where it merges with our own world.

The Master is distraught that fundamental facts pertaining to his journey have been misrepresented upon retelling, which he states is “a sign of the pressure toward misunderstanding that haunts all social communion” (1989b:274). This misunderstanding refers to the fact that meaning (and especially narrative) is plural and pervasive, and subject to the vagaries of interpretation and circumstance. The process of semiosis itself becomes unlimited in the face of such an explosion of meanings. Delany illustrates the difficulty of ascribing textual meaning, in particular, by including a lengthy ‘stream-of-consciousness’ passage where the only punctuation is variable spacing and paragraph breaks. Given Delany’s comment that he is a “sentence lover” at heart, this passage challenges the process of signification by breaking down the basic building block of a text, namely its sentences. By its very disorder and randomness, this passage also serves to illustrate the high level of organisation, and its nature as an artificial construct, of even a readerly text.¹²

6. with a thumbnail, nudged and nipped the dark, beneath bark’s brown the
yellow wood beneath green, copper under oil the ashy slate

stepped into hip-high troughs with hides floating, nudged them
with poles while the gray gunk you waded in took the hairs off the leather later
on the sandy ledge examined his newly hairless thigh

Zadyuk had never worked in the tanning troughs but he had six
months at seventeen (1989b:276)

The passage is followed by a quotation from *Grammatical Man* by Jeremy Campbell, who claims that about 50% of English is redundant when considering samples of eight letters at a time, a figure that skyrockets when taking into account whole pages or even bigger textual units such as chapters. This means that “much of what we write is dictated by the structure of the language and is more or less forced upon us” (1989b:278). It is this for this reason that the reader is able to comprehend

¹² It also reflects the continuing influence of Joyce on Delany, which has been prevalent as far back as *Dhalgren*.

the passage above – Delany has simply taken out the redundant parts, which makes its appearance less legible as conventional text, but leaves the basic meaning intact.

The main signified of the novella is the mysterious plague that strikes Kolhari, which has its counterpart in the HIV/AIDS epidemic in New York in the early 1980s.¹³ Delany states that, “in Nevèryon there is, of course, a model for the outbreak of the disease”, referring to an earlier epidemic that had struck the outlying Ulvayn islands (1989b:283). Another model is provided by a lengthy quotation from Artaud describing the collapse of social order with the advent of a full-scale epidemic, and the anarchy and mayhem that ensue.

‘The dead already clog the streets in ragged pyramids gnawed at by animals around the edges. Entire streets are clogged by the piles of dead. Then the houses open and the delirious victims, their minds crowded with hideous visions, spread howling through the streets.’ (Delany 1989b:279)

An interesting aspect of the Artaud account is that no specific date or historical period is attributed to it. Instead, like the Kolhari plague, it transcends the limitations or strictures of history to become a timeless model of a particular society’s response to an all-engulfing disaster. A disturbing aspect of the Artaud account is that the social energy unleashed leads to a reversal of traditional societal roles, and gnaws through the moral fibre that originally held that particular society together. In a sense the plague is the ultimate signified that negates all meaning, the all-encompassing absence that brings death and destruction, and in the face of which nothing can be done except to turn the society that is doomed on its head as a last, final protest. This is the first intimation of the Bakhtinian notion of the carnivalesque in the novella.

‘Neither the idea of an absence of sanctions nor that of imminent death suffices to motivate acts so gratuitously absurd on the part of men who did not believe death could end anything. And how to explain the surge of erotic fever among the recovered victims who, instead of fleeing the city, remain where they are, trying to wrench a criminal pleasure from the dying or even the dead, half crushed under the pile of corpses where chance has lodged them...’ (Delany 1989b:280)

The Kolhari plague provides a model or backdrop against which the contemporary response to the HIV/AIDS crisis can be evaluated. An example of such behavioural modelling is Pheron’s ‘coming out’ to his father, who initially rejects him, but then admits that he had been wrong, and says he wants Pheron to be his son “any way you are” (1989b:291). Nevèryon is supposed to be a land steeped in the

¹³ It also brings to mind *The Plague* by Albert Camus, in which the town of Orin finds itself in the grip of a virulent plague and at the same time is cut off from the rest of the world.

mists of history, but in terms of social relations it is as modern as the most enlightened tenets of gay liberation, as this encounter between father and son reveals. The difference between Nevèryon and 'our' world is the signficatory weight attached to homosexuality, bearing in mind the impact of cultural differences.

Delany's reference to Artaud paves the way for him to signpost Kolhari's initial response to the plague, which is to dispatch an Imperial deposition "to the very borders" (1989b:294) of the Queen's empire to extend an invitation to Gorgik the Liberator to pay a visit to Kolhari. In honour of this special event it is announced that the entire city will celebrate with a week of carnival. Just as Gorgik went about his life's work of freeing all the slaves of Nevèryon, so is it anticipated that he will free the land of the plague, or transform the people's understanding of it – which turns out to be the same thing. Significantly, Gorgik never makes a physical appearance in the novella, with the consequences of his passing being the only intimations of himself as a character. Like the Master, he can be seen as another incarnation of the author function, which is by definition removed from the text, although inscribing its indelible mark upon it. Yet another version of the author function is to be found in the travelling storyteller Norema, who provides a critical commentary on the decision by the High Court of Eagles to invite the Liberator.

The mention of Carnival, and they act as if, finally and at last, they've trapped their Liberator, hauled him back from what moment of flight, and fixed him in one of their empty halls, like a beast or a prisoner chained in some void cistern. Will he be strong enough to act from within court walls, to make himself heard through the granite that, from now on, surrounds him? Will he be able to thrust his arm through the fog of protocol, tradition, habit, the very constitution of power with which he now becomes one? Will he be powerful? What is possible from within the paralysing citadel? (Delany 1989b:297-98)

The notion that the Liberator has somehow managed to escape the boundaries of Nevèryon, or in a sense has been freed from the history cast about himself by his own exploits, is hinted at by the fact that a deposition has to be sent to the borders of the realm in order to extend the Queen's invitation, which is more like an invocation. Norema notes that the Liberator has been "hauled back from what moment of flight" by the desire of the people to claim him for themselves. The "paralysing citadel" she refers to is a symbol of institutional society itself, and the web of power relations that enmesh and define it. This is referred to as a "fog of protocol", but the tangible effect is like chains in a prison: it shackles and restricts. The most profound blurring of the character-author distinction in the novella occurs when Norema describes how, "sitting on high rocks by the sea, I inked my skins with notions for 'The Game of Time and Pain'".

Who is the giver in such situations? Myself? The sea? The rocks I sat on? Time? Or the nameless god of language skills, who is at once so niggardly and so profligate with the blessings she holds back from living song to bestow on silent record? (Delany 1989b:298)

Here Delany has transposed himself onto Norema, who is wondering where her ideas or inspiration come from. Being a primitive people, she would rather attribute this to the “nameless god of language skills” than her environment. Just as the Nevèryon sequence has allowed Delany to create contrasting models of history and genre, so does he invoke Norema as a model of the author, who travels the land telling and collecting tales as a sort of trade. She recounts how she was set upon twice by bandits who thought her a smuggler, but managed to escape both times when they found her cart “contained nothing of saleable value, but rather the old marked-on skins where I work out my tales” (1989b:298). However, upon a third occasion, the criminal became so enraged when he recognised that what Norema was transporting was writing that he set about destroying most of her skins, as if this would negate the very act of the writing process itself.

Towards the end of the novella a man in the carnival procession takes a hammer to the Bridge of Lost Desire in an attempt to assuage his fears about the plague by destroying the physical structure of the bridge. In both instances, the writing and the bridge are merely the visible signs of a process of signification with a built-in redundancy, meaning that the actual signifieds can indeed be destroyed, or decay with time, but they are only one link in a recomplicated chain of meaning. This leads Norema to contemplate the creative process, and how it functions when she composes a sentence to convey a particular thought or idea. The comparative image she settles on is Pheron weaving and unweaving at a single row, which is akin to her choosing and discarding words and sentences as she compiles the fabric of her tales.

Did his slow, bright pattern bring it to mind, then? As his shuttles went in and out and under, carrying colour over, dropping one hue beneath another, I thought: *That* is what *I* do when I make a tale! Whatever god oversees the making of webs and nets and fabrics must also oversee the construction of stories. (Delany 1989b:300)

The image of a text as a web recalls Delany’s idea of the *textus* in *Triton*, an idea that is particularly applicable to the Nevèryon sequence, where Delany has cast the net of his series over a collection of stories and a novel. This greater *textus* is reflected in the structure of ‘The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals’ itself, which cast its own net from Artaud to semiotics to weave a dense fabric of allusion and magic, and

where the author himself appears in various guises and characters, recomplicating the process of signification and genre definition.

In contemplating the carnival itself, Norema recounts a festival on the “marginal island” of her origin where everyone swapped clothes, genders, and social roles – from chief hunters and head wives pretending to be beggars and outcasts, to social pariahs being treated like kings and queens for a day. Norema states that this was “a wonderfully healing practice”, as it gave people the opportunity to realise that social roles are constructs and not inviolable givens.

The fact that women pretend to be men and vice versa implies that, in everyday life, even gender is circumscribed by a male/female binary opposition in a patriarchal society that privileges male power. Instead gender roles are fluid, rather than being chains that bind sexual identity. Norema’s account of the festival is reminiscent of Artaud’s description of social behaviour in the aftermath of a plague, where a similar role reversal takes place when people realise that the only thing holding them to a particular position or viewpoint in society is the social compact itself.

Artaud writes how purity comes to the lecher and generosity to the miser, while “the warrior-hero sets fire to the city he once risked his life to save” (1989b:280). It is this hint of darker forces and passions that leads Norema to contemplate the coming of the Liberator in the same light as the plague that is descending upon Kolhari – as a force of social disruption and upheaval. Opposed to the carnival, which is a celebratory festival, there will be a darker ceremony known as the Calling of the Amnewor, an ancient Nevèryon deity from some neglected pantheon, who will be beseeched by his supplicants to spare the city from death and destruction, which is the particular vocation of this god. Delany contrasts the Amnewor with a serial killer stalking the underbelly of New York, murdering homeless derelicts. Darkness and light, desire and depravity, plague and carnival, Liberator and storyteller – these are some of the fundamental binary oppositions that Delany sets against each other in his text. Norema sums up the implications of the carnival for Kolhari and Nevèryon as a whole:

... when I think of what those songs, that laughter must mean to those who are excluded from it, I want to flee this city, this country, this land ready to think of anything but the pain within it. Only considering what lies on the other side of such flight stops me. And when I consider, I imagine in place of my personal exile, some text, a tale I might weave together, here, now, in this room at the end of this Kolhari alley, a luminous fabric that leaps from the loom of language for a monstrous, phthartic flight, soaring, habromanic, glorious as song and happy as summer, till finally it sinks into the savage and

incurable complexities of its own telling, to be torn apart by what impelled it: angry criminals fall to ravage a cartful of parchments.

This will be a fine celebration.

This will be a dark carnival. (Delany 1989b:301)

Norema's tale, of course, is 'The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals'. In this moment, the intra-textual text, and the larger text encompassing it, collapse into a single fluid form, and the boundary separating the two falls as Delany becomes Norema, and New York turns into Nevèryon. Ted recounts to Chip – which is Delany's nickname to his friends, indicating yet another role for himself in his text, namely that of father-confessor – that he was wandering around “-th Street, just beyond Ninth Avenue”, and crossed a bridge where a carnival was taking place, with torches on the bridge walls, bizarre costumes, and copious nudity. When Ted looked back after the crossing, the entire scene was gone, and he says to Chip: “It sounds like something out of one of your stories” (1989b:353). Delany comments that the notion of suspension of disbelief associated with fantasy, SF and S&S, whereby the reader is asked to be an accomplice in various violations of physical or scientific reality in the interests of the fictional discourse at hand, is problematic because “it makes art (however willingly) a kind of cheat”.

Delany argues that he believes art to be “wholly a formal enterprise”, encompassing certain tenets from Flaubert and Baudelaire to Pater and Wilde “that have made the twentieth century's experimentation possible” (1989b:371). In other words, literature has a lineage, and any modern writer – of SF or any other genre – is at the end of a long chain of experimentation with regard to process and meaning. If this seems like a hierarchy that arranges the achievements – and, by association, genres – of literature into a strict order of importance and value, one only has to note Delany's comment that “we all have our personal pantheons – there are no canons anymore” (1989b:316).

The question inevitably arises of how Delany can broach a serious subject such as HIV/AIDS in the context of S&S, or how anything that he says in such a context can be taken seriously. Given the gravity and grim reality of this modern epidemic, interspersing it with a totally fictional narrative seems to tarnish its significance. However, this view contains an implicit value judgement as to the intrinsic validity of S&S as a literary genre, and it is precisely such judgements that Delany is trying to subvert. I would argue that his views on HIV/AIDS, its social consequences and implications, and the terrible toll of suffering and loss that has ensued from it, are no less forceful for being expressed in an S&S context. Delany is using this context to model alternative social responses to the large-scale outbreak of an epidemic, and Nevèryon provides an opportunity to place contemporary responses in context, and to

judge them objectively, without being ensnared in the chains of signification that bind modern views of HIV/AIDS, which became known as the gay plague, or God's wrath upon the collected deviancy and perversion of humanity – as if there could ever be a receptacle robust or big enough to contain such a daunting concept.

In 'The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals', Delany includes a letter written by a woman whose anonymity lends her views a representative resonance, transforming them not only into a mouthpiece for her gender, but confronting the prejudice and stigmatism in general that underlies all discrimination, be it sexual or gender-related:

'What really angers me about the Aids business is that women, we, find ourselves in the position of *helping men*. ... Where were they when we were fighting the health-care system because of what it routinely did to women? ...

'What we must do, politically, is make it clear that the bigotry that sees Aids as a sinner's punishment (or merely assumes that gay men's lives are expendable or trivial or not important) is the same bigotry that hates and fears women and wants to keep us in our place ...

'To be morally upset about how people take their sexual pleasures is surely the weirdest human quirk ever.' (Delany 1989b:292-93)

In 'Appendix A' of *Return to Nevèryon*, Delany emphasises that the entire series is a model of late twentieth-century America. He argues that the important question is not whether it is accurate or inaccurate, but what relation it bears to the thing being modelled – which, in the case of Nevèryon, is "rich, eristic, and contestatory (as well as documentary), I hope" (1989c:381). As a musician remarks in 'The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals': "... I would hear some particularly wondrous tale from a teller that revealed in the pattern of its narration a fine and fundamental organisation in the real world it mimicked" (1989b:337).

The boundary between the text and the real world is broached as the reader seeks to find the organisational order implicit in a text in the world around us or, not finding it, seek to impose such textual unity. The text serves as a model that helps to represent society in an orderly, clear fashion – and by this model we can learn how society functions and is constituted. And the basis of the meaning of society, and civilisation itself, is language, which Delany states in 'Appendix A' "is first and foremost a stabiliser of behaviour, thought, and feeling, of human responses and reactions – both for groups and for individuals" (1989c:360).

In other words, language is the basic substrate upon which society is constructed. But the relationship between society and language is not nearly so simplistic, for social authority and power relations have to be taken into account: these are also constructed like a language in that they stabilise behaviour in favour of the dominant patriarchal discourse. Delany argues further that attaching "appropriate

signifiers to appropriate powers, functions, and artifacts” represents a “Symbolic alignment” akin to that alignment used by patriarchal society to stabilise itself as the dominant discourse. In a sense, the Nevèryon sequence provides a model of this aligning process, as it takes place in an ancient time when writing is still a new invention.

In terms of the plague that strikes Kolhari, it provides a model of how this fictional society copes with the disease, and how it is assimilated by institutional society. This is contrasted with the alignment process by which the signification of HIV/AIDS has become stabilised in our society. Delany argues that it is during this crucial aligning process that a particular signification system is fixed or privileged and, once entrenched, is very difficult to dislodge from its position of discourse, as it is fixed by language itself. Such a recasting of the fundamental myths of a civilisation is represented by the Nevèryon sequence itself, based on the Culhar Fragment, “that most ancient of ancient texts on which the stories in this series are all, in part or in whole, based” (1989c:353).¹⁴

From the basis of this fictional fragment, the fundamentals of the birth of civilisation – money, writing, slavery – are recast in a new light. The logical conclusion of this process is ‘The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals’, where a social model is constructed from that society’s response to a potentially devastating epidemic – a model that can be used to gauge our own reactions and responses to a similar situation. Delany also provides a sustained critique of the novella in the form of a dialogue between Steiner and Kermit, two of his own authorial personas. Kermit levels the criticism that Delany fails in both his stated aims: of depicting “the feel of the gay community between ’82 and ’84, when he was apparently writing his story and the Aids coverage was at its height”, and of depicting the “day-to-day life of the ancient people” of Nevèryon (1989b:443).

He’s just playing at their lives, anachronisms all over the place; and his rituals and gods are obviously phony to the core! I mean, even in terms of his own allegory, just look at what he’s done. He starts off promising us a story about various and sundry little people, trying to deal with a medical catastrophe, but slowly and inexorably the Discourse of the Master displaces everyone else’s, until finally, it completely takes over. (Delany 1989b:444)

I do not think it is Delany’s intention to scupper any and all criticism of the novella by jumping the gun, so to speak, in critiquing it himself. Rather, all that he is doing is providing an alternative interpretation or outlook on the text. A point to note

¹⁴ The Culhar fragment is an imaginary *parergon* or supplement, as it is referred to, but not included in the text.

is that Kermit seems to suggest that Delany loses focus, in that his initial aim of giving a representative overview of the views of the populace gradually eroded into the singular edifice of the Master's discourse. Rather than being a mistake, I would argue that this was his intention all along, for the voice of the Master in its guise as various characters represents the ultimate stabilising system of the text as discourse. The Master can stake a claim to objectivity by representing alternative viewpoints, but these all have to be filtered first through his own singular viewpoint. Thus, when the text is stripped to its bare essentials, all that remains is the discourse of the Master, or the absence or interpretative space that he circumscribes.

Kermit notes, too, that the "worldly Discourse of the Master is replaced by the transcendental rhetoric of the Priest ... saying more or less the same thing the Master said" (1989b:444). This refers to the Priest presiding over the ceremony of the Calling of the Amnewor, which ironically takes place in Gorgik the Liberator's old underground headquarters, and involves the attempted resurrection of a corpse on a throne. The same throne features in 'The Tale of Fog and Granite' during a sadomasochistic sex scene mimicking a slave/master relationship, where the dominant player on the throne achieves orgasm through the debasement of the lower party enchained at his feet. The fact that the Calling of the Amnewor takes place at the same venue indicates the ceremony's attempt to subvert the fundamental link between sex and death, and procreation and destruction. This link is emphasised further when it is revealed that the Priest is actually a character called Hibiscus, from the contemporary strand of the narrative, in another guise. Hibiscus and the Cockettes were a theatre troupe from San Francisco in the 1970s, with Delany describing the former as

... a scrawny young man dressed in a white slip, with a maroon stole about his shoulders and collapsing basketball sneakers showing beneath his hem...
(Delany 1989b:313)

It is ironic that this colourfully eccentric figure is the model for the Priest presiding over a ceremony as portent-laden as the summoning of a deity, but the Amnewor is described as "a god of edges, borders, and boundaries" (1989b:438-39). Hibiscus's magical reappearance in Nevèryon is an indication of the transgression of such boundaries.

The novella returns to the Master's account of his youthful attempt to cross Nevèryon, and retrace the footsteps of the famed inventor Belham. After many misguided efforts to untangle myth and rumour from historical fact, the Master concludes that he has no right to "presume to retrieve the true tale of Belham", as his "own story was congruent with his neither in time nor in space" (1989b:406). This

revelation occurs at the point when the Master finds himself at the southernmost edge of his map – “and that map was Nevèryon” (1989b:407). Thus he had journeyed as far as he possibly could “to the points of Belham’s birth and death” as he was able, but what he had failed to realise was that the two points were separated by more than distance. What was also important was the signifiatory space that defines these two points, which raises the question of what, if anything, lays beyond the ‘mappable’ or definable:

I felt as if I might also be face to face with something new, something in no way involved with Belham, something not called Nevèryon, something wondrous I might see or feel if only I was free For here was also the possibility of leaving behind all the tangles of humanity and history Nevèryon herself seemed to have made hopelessly problematic (Delany 1989b:407)

With Nevèryon not being “mapped to a precise edge”, and the Master having reached the edge of the physical map signifying this realm, the possibility is presented of stepping beyond the defined boundary of Nevèryon into the totally unknown, which signifies a wholly new interpretative space. This is precisely what the Master attempts one night: to step beyond the “odd and undefinable” (1989b:409) border of Nevèryon itself. “My body seemed to glitter blackly in the midst of this transgression of a boundary all but inarticulable,” he states (1989b:410).

The Master encounters some “monster god” that roams the borders of Nevèryon, and flees before its imagined wrath at his potential transgression. Delany follows this account with a brief comment on the SF models for the Nevèryon sequence, indicating that what the Master encountered was perhaps signification or ‘modelling’ personified. What separates Nevèryon from the real world is not only that it is historically or temporally obscure, but that it is a specific historical model of society and its functioning. If that boundary is transgressed, then the difference between the two will be diluted, and the distinctiveness of Nevèryon as an alternative model will be compromised. Significantly, the Amnewor is described as a monster “common to us all”:

... prowling the border between one and another, or even between us and a land more different still from ours? I assure you, these are as real as the monster that guards what is, after all, the other’s boundary as much as it is ours. For she does not care what distinctions she guards, or how we sex her in a homage to the concept of distinction itself. She only cares that distinctions exist. (Delany 1989b:439)

The point here is that a boundary is essentially an interface, and in this instance it is the divide between Nevèryon and New York. Ted remarks to Delany that Gorgik

the *Liberator* is a Saturday afternoon regular at a pornographic moviehouse on Third Avenue. Upon visiting the venue and spotting the person referred to, Delany wonders in consternation how his friend could have seen the lineaments of Gorgik in this “large, hulking, blond(!?), most likely Polish” figure. He concludes: “Well, each to his own *Liberator*” (1989b:465).

Delany recounts how, walking through Riverside Park one night during a cold wet spring, he sees a person squatting at a fire he had built to keep warm. The fact that the person is one-eyed indicates that this is Noyeed, a character from *Nevèryon*. In broken English, and with a vaguely Middle Eastern accent, he tells Delany that he had attended the Calling of the Amnewor, and later had left Kolhari for the north, where he had somehow miraculously (magically?) harnessed a dragon, and achieved the impossible: a flight from *Nevèryon*. The ultimate boundary is ourselves, and is one that we only transgress at death (birth is a boundaryless becoming, since the newborn does not experience any boundaries to him- or herself). Hibiscus describes this boundary at the ceremony for the Calling of the Amnewor:

‘He reels ... for you are the border he must pass, transgress, obliterate with some terminal motion to become one with what animates him.’ (Delany 1989b:441)

The Amnewor is only given dominance through the power of signification, and when it is realised that this signified is arbitrary, it ceases to become the purveyor of an absolute truth. Hibiscus hopes that “some informative contradiction remains to be untangled, which may define the distance between our lives and the plague” (1989b:441-442). The answer to the plague lies in the language by which it is defined. By confronting the constructedness of language, we can begin to articulate new definitions, and start to redefine our own implicit assumptions and beliefs. This is the fundamental realisation that Rydra Wong achieves at the end of *Babel-17*, leading to the creation of a new language, and a new understanding.

When Delany asks Noyeed to tell him about his miraculous flight on the dragon, he says he must use his own language, referred to as “the softly singsong syllables of that long-ago distant tongue” (1989b:471). That Delany is able to understand him shows that he is part of the text himself, and has authored the meaning of this encounter. But when Delany asks Noyeed what he thinks of contemporary New York, the communication between the two breaks down, and understanding fails.

'Tell me,' I said at last, 'since you've only been here a little while, how do you find our strange and terrible land? Have you heard that we have plagues of our own?'

Curious, he looked at me across the fire, turned to the river, glanced at the city about us, then looked at me again.

And I would have sworn, on that chill spring night, he no longer understood me. (Delany 1989b:475)

It is in this final instant that Nevèrÿon and New York merge, and where the future becomes palpable, as it has yet to be signified. It is in this absence of meaning, this margin of desire and discourse, where Nevèrÿon's gods stalk, and its dragons take flight.

Chapter Four

Signs and Cities

In this chapter I have chosen to focus on *Dhalgren* (1974) and *Stars in My Pocket like Grains of Sand* (1984) in order to demonstrate the complexity and diversity of Delany's critical project.¹ Separated by a decade, these widely disparate novels contest the notion that SF is a construct fixed in (and fixated on) popular culture, lacking the depth and resonance to be sounded out by the tools of modern literary criticism. Being labelled SF seems to suggest that they are singular components of a polymorphous unity. And yet their divergence, from each other and the popular SF mainstream,² demonstrates the potentiality of the genre for transforming its boundaries into frontiers.

Despite its central SF conceit of a city in the grip of some unknown cataclysm that has affected the very nature of space/time, *Dhalgren* is resolutely realist in its depiction of the marginal underbelly of Bellona.³ Ironically, a character remarks that "I suspect the whole thing is science fiction" (1974:414). In *Stars*, on the other hand, an exotic space opera crowded with alien beings and different worlds, a character remarks "that the alien is always constructed of the familiar" (1984b:183). In the course of this chapter, I wish to show how Delany incorporates postmodernism into his fictional strategy, and how this has developed from his forays into poststructuralism. First one has to investigate what postmodernism is. Bearing in

¹ John Clute refers to *Dhalgren* as Delany's magnum opus, and an articulation of "a language, based on modern literary critical theory, with which to describe and to defend SF as a genre of importance" (1995:169). Clute adds that the novel "became a cult text, and Delany became something of a guru" (1995:169). However, his and Peter Nicholls's assessment in *The Encyclopaedia of Science Fiction* is more reserved: "His critics see it as perilously self-indulgent and flabby ... other critics saw it as his most successfully ambitious work to date" (Clute and Nicholls 1993:316). *Stars* also evoked an ambivalent response: "clotted and self-consciously insistent" (Clute 1995:169) on the one hand and, on the other: "a complex narrative again asks questions about the arbitrary and parochial nature of our ethical expectations, using various forms of enjoyed degradation to make the point" (Clute and Nicholls 1993:317). The value of Delany from a critical point of view is his ability to generate such rich, and often contrary, opinions about his work.

² That is, the texts on the bookshelves that sell.

³ Delany has said that 1967 to 1968 represented his first extended experience with communes, experience that proved invaluable in writing *Dhalgren*. Indeed, *Heavenly Breakfast: An Essay on the Winter of Love* (1979) can be read in conjunction with the novel (Peplow and Bravard 1980:33-34). 'Radical' adaptations are the norm in communes: "human being to human being across each individual's personal political space: male to female, female to male, black to white, white to black, private individual to politicised group, or group to individual.' The living space was physically cramped, involving 'four rooms on the second floor of a Lower East Side [New York] tenement: bathtub in the kitchen; two pantry-sized rooms railroading off that; and a fifteen-by-twenty back room, largest in the apartment.' In this small space anywhere from twelve to twenty people slept, ate, bathed, and worked. Sex was casual and varied: 'In a communal situation bisexuality has to be of at least passing interest to everyone ...'" (1980:33).

mind that there are as many definitions as there are literary critics, Brian McHale simply says that “there ‘is’ no such ‘thing’”:

Or at least there is no such thing if what one has in mind is some kind of identifiable object ‘out there’ in the world, localisable, bounded by a definite outline, open to inspection, possessing attributes about which we can all agree. (1992:1)

Chris Baldick explains that postmodernism is

a disputed term that has occupied much recent debate about contemporary culture since the early 1980s. In its simplest and least satisfactory sense it refers generally to the phase of 20th century Western culture that succeeded the reign of high modernism, thus indicating the products of the ‘space age’ after some time in the 1950s. More often, though, it is applied to a cultural condition prevailing in the advanced capitalist societies since the 1960s, characterised by a superabundance of disconnected images and styles ... (1990:174)

The theoretical positions encompassed by postmodernism range from Derrida’s critique of the metaphysics of presence to Foucault’s analysis of knowledge and power, but Hutcheon points out that “these all share a view of discourse as problematic and of ordering systems as suspect (and humanly constructed)” (1989:24). This is illustrated in Lethen’s list of the opposing characteristics of modernity and postmodernity respectively:

Hierarchy	Anarchy
Presence	Absence
Genital	Polymorphous
Narrative	Anti-narrative
Metaphysics	Irony
Determinacy	Indeterminacy
Construction of a world-model	Deconstruction of a world-model
Ontological certainty	Ontological uncertainty
	(quoted in McHale 1992:7–8)

McHale argues that the dominant of postmodernism is ontological (1987:10), meaning the defining aspect of a work of art – that is, the rules that govern its shape and form. However, the dominant is not hierarchical, and McHale is careful to point out that a single text may display many dominants, depending on the analytical slant applied to it. Ontology is defined as the branch of metaphysics dealing with the nature of being, which in a postmodernist context also refers to the world at large in which this notion of being is expressed or constrained. McHale refers to Thomas Pavel’s definition of an ontology as a “‘a theoretical description of a universe’” (1987:27).

Postmodernist ontological questions are what Dick Higgins terms “post-cognitive” ones, and range from the ontology of the literary text itself to the fictional world it portrays:

Which world is this? What is to be done in it? Which of my selves is to do it? ... What is a world?; what kinds of world are there, how are they constituted, and how do they differ?; what happens when different kinds of world are placed in confrontation, or when boundaries between worlds are violated?; what is the mode of existence of a text, and what is the mode of existence of the world (or worlds) it projects?; how is a projected world structured? (McHale 1987:10)

While it is obvious that a gamut of ontological themes or attitudes is available to the postmodernist writer, they all share one thing in common: the foregrounding of ontological concerns through a repertoire of fictional strategies, which McHale defines as the poetics of postmodernism. However, he is careful to avoid privileging postmodernism as being part of some sort of literary canon, which again invokes the spectre of a totalising hierarchy, and stresses instead “it is only against the background of general theories of literary ontology that specific postmodernist practices can be identified and understood” (1987:27). The ‘possible worlds’ approach to ontology as predicated by postmodernism has a profound implication for the relationship between fiction and reality, as the previously-inviolable boundary between the two is weakened by the notion that reality itself is a construct, and not an immutable given – and thus can be forged anew:

The possible-worlds approach not only complicates fiction’s internal ontological structure, it also weakens its external boundary or frame. Classical mimetic theories ... had a vested interest in maintaining this conceptual boundary, since without a sharp initial distinction between fiction and reality there could be no relation of similarity or mirroring ... They make it possible for us to understand the passage or circulation that occurs across that boundary. Fiction’s epidermis, it appears, is not an impermeable but a semipermeable membrane. (McHale 1987:34)

The ‘possible worlds’ strategy seems as much a part of SF as it is of postmodernism, and indeed McHale points out that SF, too, is “governed by the ontological dominant” (1987:59). But he goes much further than this:

Indeed, it is perhaps the ontological genre par excellence. We can think of science fiction as postmodernism’s noncanonised or ‘low art’ double, its sister-genre in the same sense that the popular detective thriller is modernist fiction’s sister-genre. (1987:59)

McHale refers to SF's critical reception as postmodernism's "'low art' double", even with it being the epitome of the ontological dominant. This implies that he believes SF to be inherently inferior, and that it can only aspire to copying other forms, instead of being a unique literary form in its own right. He gives a nod to Darko Suvin's description of SF as the "'literature of cognitive estrangement'", indicating that 'estrangement' means "confronting the empirical givens of our world with something not given, something from outside or beyond it", which Suvin defines as the *novum* (1987:59). However, McHale argues that Suvin's definition of SF is flawed, because any generic fiction contains at least one *novum*, or element that does not exist in our own world, and that is the main protagonist.

Thus the concept of the *novum* cannot be used to differentiate SF from other literary genres. Instead McHale points to Robert Scholes's definition as being more indicative of the true functioning of SF. The point is not that SF contains *novums* – that is, elements that diverge in varying degrees from the world as we know it – but how these *novums* relate to each other and the world as we know it to produce the effect of estrangement as mediated through cognition:

Fabulation ... is fiction that offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way. (Scholes 1975:29)

Scholes also highlights the basic structuralist tenet that "all systems of notation offer us models of reality rather than descriptions of it" (1975:4), which is translated into the 'possible worlds' strand of the ontology of postmodernism. The fact that reality cannot be recorded or transcribed means that "all writing, all composition, is construction", meaning that a writer does not mimic the world, but merely presents one version of it.

And, as postmodernism poses, if one version, why not many? Scholes comments that one response to the dilemma of representing reality in a fictional form has simply been to "redefine the aesthetic act itself", and write about "the possibilities and impossibilities" of fiction. This refers to John "'old analogy between Author and God, novel and world'" (McHale 1987:29):

... no longer content with invisibly exercising his freedom to create worlds, the artist now makes his freedom visible by thrusting himself into the foreground of his work. He represents himself in the act of making his fictional world – or unmaking it, which is also his prerogative. There is a catch, of course: the artist represented in the act of creation or destruction is himself inevitably a fiction. ... (McHale 1987:30)

In the instance of a writer transforming him- or herself into a novum in his own text, then the relationship of that text with himself or herself, the audience, and reality as it is commonly perceived must inevitably change. The consequence is that the artificiality of the text, or its true nature as a construct, is foregrounded, and “the devices of art are laid bare” (1987:30). This theme is prevalent in postmodernism, especially given its concern with the nature of fiction and reality, and how to manipulate the constructedness of both.

Perceived as a low-art genre, SF is not commonly seen as the domain for such theoretical concerns – and it is one of the particular achievements of Delany that not only has he opened up the genre to such possibilities, but has revealed that it is as rich a field in this regard as that offered by postmodernism itself. The response that *Dhalgren* elicited from within the boundaries of SF itself suggested just how reactionary the novel was deemed to be in comparison with ‘mainstream’ SF. Reviewing the book for the Los Angeles Times, Harlan Ellison declared that he had abandoned the tome at page 361, as it was “not a novel but a ‘career’” (Delany 1984:36). Barry Malzberg stated that the novel was nothing but “‘tenth-rate Joyce pastiche’” (1976:78). These views seem to suggest that Delany had harnessed serious literary concerns onto the popular bandwagon of SF and, in doing so, had somehow betrayed the populist cause of SF. That he was enriching the genre by expanding its perceived boundaries was not given due consideration by these critics. The main bone of contention was the suspicion that Delany had written the book for an audience of critics, and not the general reader – that is, his supportively loyal fan base, who were subsequently baffled by, and felt strong resentment towards, the shot fired high over their brows. Delany comments on this issue as follows:

Well, it was definitely written to appease a certain rich critical response in myself – a response which, in myself, I associate with something mature and measured. I wanted to read a book – solid, sedate, sexual, and complex – full of mysteries that proliferate in orderly fashion by the very fact of their solution, a book I could sink my mental teeth into after they had been sharpened by what I’d found valid in the art and aesthetic discourse of the past century-and-a-quarter. But if it was written ‘for critics’, it was not written for any fancied reward to be gleaned from any critical commentary. (1989:37)

The main issue at stake here is a writer’s motivation to write, and what compels him or her to put pen to paper. This, of course, is followed by a lengthy process by which the writer’s work is run through the mill of the publishing process, whereby it has to satisfy certain commercial and/or artistic criteria. The fact that *Dhalgren* achieved success in both aspects has led Delany to declare that the book “has found its audience” (Delany 1989:58) – despite the vituperative critical response

that greeted its publication. Delany contends that the book received almost no publicity from its initial publisher, Bantam,⁴ and even the few favourable reviews it garnered warned that the book, “besides long, is involuted, obscure, and difficult – if not downright tedious” (1989:58). But ultimately the reputation it gathered was sufficient to ensure it an audience:

It is not the runaway audience of the manufactured bestseller. It is not the all too swayable and, finally, all too naïve audience of hardcore science fiction readers. Because it is neither of these, we may speculate that it might well be the basis for that most important of audiences, the vertical audience of concerned and alert readers interested in the progress of American fiction. (Delany 1989:58)

This sounds portentous, and Delany is too cavalier in dismissing the hardcore SF audience, as this audience supported him from *The Jewels of Aptor* onwards. Interestingly, the major SF novels that followed *Dhalgren*, namely *Triton* and *Stars*, though clearly SF in the most obvious ways that *Dhalgren* was not, proved even more problematic for the genre to assimilate. Perhaps a more telling criticism was that *Dhalgren*’s astronomical sales were partly motivated by a prurient audience – with SF readers being mostly adolescent and male – intrigued by the frank descriptions of marginal sex in the novel, including a three-way heterosexual/homosexual relationship. Writing as K Leslie Steiner in an essay that gave birth to Delany’s first fictional pseudonym, and which was perhaps a fitting response to such a postmodern novel⁵ – Delany remarked that

Thirty-five odd of *Dhalgren*’s near nine hundred pages do deal with copulatory mechanics, [which] is simply not a high enough percentage – especially with the real and near-real pornography seldom more than a bookrack away. Also the ‘sex’ in *Dhalgren* is too psychologically portrayed for real arousal. From the beginning to the end of it the characters never stop thinking. (1989:57)

With such a phrase as “copulatory mechanics”, it is clear that Delany had his tongue firmly in his cheek, and never took his detractors seriously. Even with such a pointed remark that *Dhalgren* was not SF, he responded as follows through Steiner:

⁴ Interestingly, Delany notes that “no book I’ve ever published has received less attention than *Flight from Neveryon*” (1999:127).

⁵ Both novels deal with writing and the process of signification: in *Dhalgren*, the nameless main protagonist tries to wrest his own meaning from the time-warped landscape in which he finds himself, while in *Stars* Rat Korga becomes a symbol of survival. K Leslie Steiner extends both these themes into the authorial and fictional persona of Delany himself, to the extent that Steiner has evolved into a potent symbol herself.

What? Yes, it is science fiction: the hero enters over a bridge into a parallel world – see, silly! – into an alter-version of an American city where ‘...the ordinary laws of time and space’, as they used to say, ‘no longer apply’. I mean, really! (1989:93)

Frivolity and playfulness aside – which, after all, are hallmarks of postmodernism – Delany’s purpose in unleashing *Dhalgren* on an unsuspecting SF world was very definite and very serious. He refers to the novel a “frontal attack on the field” (1989:93). With postmodernism being an established genre with a large output and a deep pool of talented writers, it would be presumptuous for a single writer “to hope that a single work, or even a series of works, might restructure to whatever extent the concept of the form” (1989:35). It must be remembered that Delany was commenting on the nature of the genre at the time of *Dhalgren* in the early 1970s, when the genre’s respectability was still in its infancy. In terms of SF,

it is not so preposterous for a writer to hope that a single work, fermenting in the acknowledged live area of the field, might loosen and recontour the web of possibilities, charging that web at each repositioned intersection of possible word and possible word. I think, in exactly in that slow and inevitable way that causes shrieks both of rage and delight, *Dhalgren* is doing that. And I like it. (Delany 1989:35)

Delany comments further that he did not desire to see the genre littered with imitations of *Dhalgren*, but that his wish was for the field to sensitise itself to the “textures and organisation” of his novel, and thereby enrich its scope. He admitted that the line between the content of the text and the external world “is frequently foggy – especially for the writer”:

As an SF writer I frequently see myself as trying to reach the boundary, the edge, the limit of fiction, a journey that can only be made on paper. Similarly, I am tempted to come as close to the line as possible from the critical side – one wants to live not just dangerously, but dangerously and intelligently. (1989:35)

Dhalgren diffuses the boundary between itself as text and the external world due to the fact that the novel ‘begins’ in the middle of a sentence.⁶ This disrupts the conventional framing of a novel, and challenges our conception of a beginning. It also creates unease in the reader, who is plunged unceremoniously into the text without the sense of control or mastery usually afforded by beginning at a clearly discernible starting point. Derrida questions what is the beginning of a text, which has various

⁶ This is perhaps a conscious reference to James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*.

frames or borders, such as the cover, title page, index, and publishing and catalogue details. All this serves to complicate the notion of a proper 'beginning':

If we are to approach a text, it must have an edge ... all those boundaries that form the running border of what used to be called a text, of what we once thought this word could identify, i.e., the supposed end and beginning of a work, the unity of a corpus, the title, the margins, the signatures, the referential realm outside the frame, and so forth. What has happened, if it has happened, is a sort of overrun [*débordement*] that spoils all these boundaries and divisions and forces us to extend the accredited concept, the dominant notion of a 'text' ... that is henceforth no longer a finished corpus of writing, some content enclosed in a book or its margins, but a differential network, a fabric of traces referring endlessly to something other than itself, to other differential traces. Thus the text overruns all the limits assigned to it ... (Derrida 1979:83–4)

What Derrida is calling for is a re-evaluation of a text as an object bound between covers, which symbolises the clear division between the textual and real worlds. A text cannot enclose that which it enfolds because it is comprised of language, and the units of language are arbitrary and relational, resulting in a web of differential, sliding traces. However, as Barthes points out, language also creates the illusion of the textually-ordered space in which a writer operates. And language is both boundary and frontier, beginning and end, of a text:

It enfolds the whole of literary creation much as the earth, the sky, and the line where they meet outline a familiar habitat for mankind. It is not so much a stock of materials as a horizon, which implies both a boundary and a perspective; in short, it is the comforting area of an ordered space. (Sontag 1982:31)

In terms of the language of *Dhalgren*, Robert Elliot Fox argues that the novel crosses the boundary between fiction and contemporary criticism, adding that this is the result of postmodernism jumbling "the borders between these ostensibly different sorts of texts" (1996:129). He refers to Kid's description of his book of poems as "'a complicitous illusion in lingual catalysis, a crystalline and conscientious alkahest'" (1996:129). Fox explains that 'alkahest' is a prized universal solvent, while 'catalysis' refers to the modification of a chemical reaction by a catalyst. The former term is from alchemy, and the latter from chemistry, with the one suggesting magic, and the other science. Both refer to processes of change or transformation, and this is also the very nature of the language in which these terms are articulated:

Whatever its materiality, there still is something magical about language, as with all our arts: our language may change as we change, and we may also be changed by language. (Fox 1996:129)

The notion of change and transformation is central to *Dhalgren*, represented by the bridge that the nameless protagonist crosses over to enter Bellona, the city of signs, and by which means he attempts to leave at the novel's end. Or does he? This ambiguous mirroring of the novel's beginning leaves this, and many other questions, unanswered. All that matters is change itself, which cannot be undone. Once crossed over, the boundary itself is transformed into a frontier.

Don't you know that once you have transgressed that boundary, every atom, the interior of every point of reality, has shifted its relation to every other you've left behind, shaken and jangled within the field of time, so that if you cross back, you return to a very different space than the one you left? You have crossed the river to come to this city? Do you really think you can cross back ... (Delany 1974:536)

Delany undermines the "ontological stability" of the world represented in *Dhalgren* by incorporating self-contradiction, repetition and denial, and throwing into epistemological doubt certain key events such as the beginning and ending. This leads to the conclusion that the city "is not a state of mind but a state of being; an ontological condition" (McHale 1987:71). The beginning of the novel provides an example of the "two modes of fictive authority" (Delany 1984:72) that characterise Delany's textual strategy in *Dhalgren*.

The nameless protagonist crosses over a bridge into the devastated city, where he meets a mysterious Oriental woman. They make love (the book's first sex scene of many occurs on page 3), and she leads him to a cave where he retrieves a chain of prisms, mirrors, and lenses. The woman runs away into a field and, while trying to catch her, she turns into a tree. (Delany manages this difficult, fantastical transition with a haunting economy.) Soon after that the (still-unnamed) protagonist thinks to himself: "No, the Daphne bit would not pass –" (Delany 1974:11), adopting an ironic postmodernist stance to his own perceived experience.

Either the protagonist actually experienced this event, or it is some sort of a hallucination – but, instead of privileging either explanation, the text actively encourages a shifting dialectic between the two. Delany himself warns against holding up this myth as a template for the novel as a whole. He concedes that "the hero, after an encounter with the Goddess, is struck with madness and poetry", which is also the substance of the myth, but warns that "to specify any more than this is to violate the book" (1984:84). Delany points out that a major theme of the novel is deconstruction

itself, and the way that signs can be broken up and recomplicated. Neither foreground nor background is privileged in the novel, creating a shimmering, constantly altering perspective as the two shift between and glide over each other. Steiner explains this Derridean strategy of endless deferment:

What Delany has done is construct not an impoverished, but a rich text, that deals specifically with the break up of social signs ... and in which the various social privileges of the text (in its various modes) simply cannot be held onto, because each is laid against a fictive foreground plane that, as we perceive it, vanishes into the background and is swallowed up in a concert of possible deconstructions. (Delany 1989:77)

The beginning of the novel also highlights the constructedness of Delany's prose in terms of his careful choice of words and phrasing, with the result that the reader has to wrest the meaning(s) from the text – that is, become an active participant in generating the text's meaning. But this readerly task is undertaken with the caveat that there is no ultimate base-line or immutable meaning, for one of postmodernism's main characteristics is to resist closure or ending.

to wound the autumnal city.
So howled out for the world to give him a name.
The in-dark answered with wind.
All you know I know ... (Delany 1974:1)

Fox unpacks some of the dense allusions in this opening, suggesting that 'autumnal' refers to the "twilight of Bellona", with the city itself being emblematic of all cities. In terms of perceiving the city as a symbol of capitalist society, the plight of Bellona can be seen to represent the fate of capitalism itself – what Fox terms "an Ozymandian realm in which the pride of late capitalist society has been (at least within this particular circle) shaken, if not yet fully humbled" (1996:129). The point is that the text does not resist such readings, but actively encourages them.

My reading of Bellona is that it is a symbolic representation of Derrida's concepts of *différance* and the *supplément*, with Kid's journey symbolising the process of signification itself. At the beginning, lacking a name, he is a signified without a signifier. But then he is named 'Kid', which demonstrates the arbitrary nature of signs, as this is not his real name, but signifies the person he becomes in the course of the novel. At the beginning the mysterious Daphne figure says to him: "Things have made you what you are. What you are will make you what you will become" (Delany 1974:4).

She asks him four questions: what he wants to change in the world, what he wants to preserve, what he is searching for, and what he is running away from. To all

four he replies: nothing, but adds that his 'purpose' is "to get through the next second, consciousness intact" – that is, to signify, to constitute some meaning or identity. The Daphne figure is unimpressed, and replies: "Then be glad you're not just a character scrawled in the margins of somebody else's lost notebook: you'd be deadly dull" (1974:5).

The spiralbound notebook is one that Kid picks up; with the righthand side of the pages already filled up, he uses the lefthand margin for a journal that becomes the novel itself. Kid, as signified by his temporary appellation, is a *tabula rasa* upon which the meaning of Bellona can be inscribed: he becomes the city's signifier. In the course of the novel, Kid asks Lanya: "Do you think a city can control the way people live inside it?" (1974:279), meaning, generally, what role does urban geography play in the socialisation process and in cementing identity and, specifically, to what extent is Bellona part of himself?

Elizabeth Grosz argues that the body can be reconceived as a socio-cultural artifact, which involves "a kind of turning inside out and outside in of the body" – that is, "how the subject's exterior is psychically constructed; and conversely, how the processes of social inscription of the body's surface construct a psychical interior" (1995:103). In other words, she wants to render permeable the boundary between the body and the external social world, and see how the two interact with, and influence, each other.

The city is one of the crucial factors in the social production of (sexed) corporeality: the built environment provides the context and co-ordinates for contemporary forms of body. The city provides the order and organisation that automatically links otherwise unrelated bodies: it is the condition and milieu in which corporeality is socially, sexually, and discursively produced. (Grosz 1995:104)

Grosz points out that the relation between bodies and cities is "more complex than may have been realised" (1995:104). She defines a 'body' as its biological reality, in terms of organs and bones, which are unified "through the psychical and social inscription of the body's surface" (1995:104). But a body requires "social triggering, ordering, and long-term administration" (1995:104) in order to realise its latent potentiality. A body becomes a person "only through the intervention of the (m)other and, ultimately, the Other" (1995:104). This 'Other' is the external context or interface provided by the prevailing social order. This produced body is structured and regulated to "become part of a social network, linked to other bodies and objects" (1995:104). Grosz describes a city as

a complex and interactive network that links together, often in an unintegrated and ad hoc way, a number of disparate social activities, processes, relations, with a number of architectural, geographical, civic, and public relations. The city brings together economic flows, and power networks, forms of management and political organisation, interpersonal, familial, and extra-familial social relations, and the aesthetic/economic organisation of space and place to create a semipermanent but everchanging built environment or milieu. (1995:105)

It is important to note that, though localised, a city is always changing, and represents a dynamic interface between its social and psychical structure. These definitions form the basis of two pervasive models of body/city interrelation. Firstly, "the city is a reflection, projection, or product of bodies" (1995:105). This implies that bodies, viewed in naturalistic terms, predate the city. The corollary of this view is that a city is an alienating environment denying the body an authentic context. In this model, all social and historical production flow from the sovereign human subject. Humans make cities, which are reflections of human endeavour in terms of physical labour and "the conceptual and reflective possibilities of consciousness itself" (1995:105).

Grosz notes several problems with this view: in the body/mind binary opposition, the former is subordinate. Also, the relation between body/subject is perceived as a one-way causal link in which the body is the effect, and the city the cause. A more sophisticated reading acknowledges the possibility of a negative feedback loop in this relation, which could result in alienation. Secondly, the body and the city, or the body and the state, are seen as isomorphic reflections of each other, as reflected in the seventeenth century when the King was seen to be the 'head' of the state, and the populace the 'body politic', with the law as its nerves, the army as its arms, and commerce as its stomach, for example. Grosz interjects pertinent, though impish, questions about such correspondence:

... in this pervasive metaphor of the body politic, the body is rarely attributed a sex. What, one might ask, takes on the metaphoric function of the genitals in the body politic? What kind of genitals are they? Does the body politic have a sex? (Grosz 1995:106)

This model is phallogentric due to the "implicit masculine coding" (1995:106) of the body politic. Additional problems are that the ideal forms of culture are moulded by nature, with the artificial construct of the body politic superseding the natural body.⁷ This model also legitimises various forms of ideal government and socialisation by the process of naturalisation. If the interrelation between body and

⁷ Of course, this is also highly culture specific.

city is neither causal or representational, then a compromise is in order. Grosz suggests taking elements from both models and combining them to produce the view that the interrelation between body and city functions by means of an interface – or a permeable boundary that is crossed and recrossed as the need arises.

What I am suggesting is a model of the relations between bodies and cities that sees them, not as megalithic total entities, but as assemblages or collections of parts, capable of crossing the thresholds between ... This model is practical, based on the productivity of bodies and cities in defining and establishing each other. It is not a holistic view, one that would stress the unity and integration of city and body, their 'ecological balance'. Rather, their interrelations involve a fundamentally disunified series of systems, a series of disparate flows, energies, events, or entities, bringing them together or drawing apart their more or less temporary alignments. (Grosz 1995:108)

In *Dhalgren*, the city of Bellona is as much a character as Kid, Lanya, or Denny – in fact, it is a crucial element of the ontological signified. The interrelation between these bodies and their city is as complex as Grosz suggests – neither can exist without the context of the other, as both are interdependent on the other for their self-definition. This is intimated when Kid questions Ernest Newboy, a famous poet, as to the worth of his own work. Newboy replies that the interpretative value of the poems is entirely dependent on the context of their composition, and thus their worth can only be gauged meaningfully by what people outside of Bellona know about the city.

When you ask me the worth of these poems, you are asking me what place the image of this city holds in the minds of those who have never been here. How can I presume to suggest? There are times, as I wander in this abysmal mist, when these streets seem to underpin all the capitals of the world. At others, I confess, the whole place seems a pointless and ugly mistake, with no relation to what I know as civilisation, better obliterated than abandoned. I can't judge because I am still in it. (Delany 1974:395)

Once again we see how the text proliferates contradictory meanings: on the one hand, Bellona is representative of cities in general, an archetypal signifier of urbanism, while on the other it is seen as an aberration on a blighted landscape. The catastrophe that struck Bellona is never explained, or even alluded to – it is merely accommodated as a necessary condition of its existence. Fox reveals that, in classical mythology, Bellona is the sister of Mars and thus the goddess of war (1996:130). – though the only thing that the city seems to be at war against is itself. As early as page 15 of the novel we learn that "very few suspect the existence of this city", with mass communication and the laws of perspective having "redesigned knowledge and

perception to pass it by". Thus Bellona is a supplement unto itself, occupying and decentring its own signifiatory space in the ontological landscape of the novel.

We learn that the population of the city has dwindled from two million to a mere 1 000 (Delany 1974:23). Tak says that the city is dangerous in terms of criminals and looters, but that the peculiar freedom afforded by Bellona in that there are no laws to break, and everything is for the taking, means that "very quickly, surprisingly quickly, you become exactly who you are" (1974:23). This returns me to the beginning of the novel, and Kid's unformed injunction of "...to wound the autumnal city" (1974:1). The verb 'wound' is paradoxical, for if Bellona is in its twilight, as suggested by the adjective 'autumnal', then how can Kid inflict further damage? (Fox 1996:132) And how exactly will he do this? Fox states that this is the inverse of the classic quest, where the aim is salvation of that which is dying.

Or are we to read 'wound' as a form of the word 'wind', meaning that somehow Kid is to draw the energies of Bellona into himself like a spring? And, yet again, to what purpose? Perhaps a clearer interpretation of the phrase can be found by looking at other uses of 'wound' in the text. Newboy says to Kid: "You have received that holy and spectacular wound which bleeds ... well, poetry" (Delany 1974:288). In one of the margins in the journal-cum-novel into which the text fragments at the end, Kid writes:

Speech is always in excess of poetry as print is always inadequate for speech. A word sets images flying through the brain from which auguries we recall all extent and intention. I'm not a poet because I have nothing to give my life to make it due, except my attention. And I don't know if my wounded sort is enough. (Delany 1974:783-4)

Kid is a poet, and his function is to write. The notebook that he finds forms the basis for his journal, which becomes/is the novel itself (that he has[d] already written). His task is to 'wound' the autumnal city – to make it bleed through his writing, for blood is the symbolic substance of life and creativity. This theme of art and the artistic consciousness or process is an integral aspect of *Dhalgren*, which, on one level, is about the rigours of artistic creation. Steiner explains that *Dhalgren* interweaves three internal texts: Kid's poems, which are published as *Brass Orchids* (though belaboured over at great length, they are never quoted in the actual text, thus foregrounding the circumstances of their creation); *The Bellona Times*, a newspaper published and edited by Roger Calkins, which Delany uses to 'report' on certain events in the novel, such as the inexplicable sightings of the double moon and the bloated sun; and the journal revealed in fragments throughout the novel, finally merging with it in Chapter VII (Delany 1989:61).

Steiner explains that this trinity of inner texts – poems, newspaper, and journal, as well as the metatext in which they are all embedded – are all debunked of their traditional authority in the course of the novel. No two editions of the newspaper have a consecutive date, the authorship of the poems is thrown into doubt at Calkins's party, and at the end the journal recontextualises, as well as seemingly continuing the story, which is not what a traditional journal does (1989:62–3). Thus conventional artistic forms and their processes of creation and legitimisation are thrown into doubt. What are the implications for Delany's notion of art and artists? Kid reads the following entry in his notebook:

Poetry, fiction, drama – I am interested in the arts of incident only so far as fiction touches life; oh no, not in any vulgar, autobiographical sense, rather at the level of the most crystalline correspondence. Consider: If an author, passing a mirror, were to see one day not himself but some character of his invention, though he might be surprised, might even question his sanity, he would still have something by which to relate. But suppose, passing on the inside, the character should glance at his mirror and see, not himself, but the author, a complete stranger, staring in at him, to whom he has no relation at all, what is this poor creature left ...? (Delany 1974: 401)

Here Delany is questioning the relationship between author and character, and whether or not characters are merely fragments of a writer's consciousness or separate entities. The corollary, of course, is to what extent the author himself is a fiction, and to what extent his characters can be 'real' in an ontological sense. In keeping with the novel's diffraction of repeated events, what Kid reads about the mirror incident in his notebook transpires in the novel. Walking past a dressing mirror, he sees what he thinks is an older version of himself, but which is actually an image of Delany:

He glanced down at the other hand. Where his was caged in blades, the reflection held – his notebook? But the correspondence ... was too banal for relief. Wanting to cry, he gazed full at the face, which, mirroring him twitch to twitch, for all its beard and glasses (and a small brass ring in one ear!) gazed back, with confusion, desperation, and sadness. (Delany 1974:377)

Despite Kid's distaste at the "vulgar autobiographical sense", this passage demonstrates that Kid and Delany are the same self – or that Kid's real name, which remains unknown even at the novel's end, could be Samuel R Delany. The two are elements of the same sign. *The Motion of Light in Water* and *Heavenly Breakfast* clearly dovetail with the world of Bellona. But the point is not to accumulate an exhaustive one-to-one concordance. Instead the constant shimmer between reality and perception is one of the central themes of *Dhalgren*.

Kid represents the criminal-artist, a recurring figure in Delany's fiction from as early as *Babel-17*. Missing a sandal, and somewhat hippie-like, he does not represent the conventional image of a poet as a refined scholar and student of life. Ernest Newboy, on the other hand, is a broad parody of the successful writer, whose auspicious arrival is first trumpeted in *The Bellona Times*, which serves to indicate the poet's social prominence. Earlier on Kid glimpses a headline that reads 'NEW BOY IN TOWN!' (1974:77), and erroneously thinks that the newspaper is referring to him – which, perhaps, on one level, it is. Newboy informs Kid of the maxim that “all poetry is about love, death, or the changing of the seasons” – but in Bellona the seasons are changeless, which represents either synthesis or stasis. He then puts forward two views of the artist: the one gives his or her all, which may not be reflected in the published output, but is evident in countless drafts. The other has ‘discovered’ that he or she is a poet, and “dedicates himself [or herself] to living, according to his [or her] concepts, the civilised life in which poetry exists because it is part of civilisation” (1974:392). Clearly Kid is the former kind of artist, who is concentrated on his work, while Newboy represents the latter, as he is more concerned with the poetic lifestyle or consciousness. However, Newboy is aware of the limits of his idealism:

‘All good poets tend to be idealistic. They also tend to be lazy, acrimonious, and power-crazed. Put any two of them together and they invariably talk about money. I suspect their best work tries to reconcile what they are with what they know and feel they should be ...’ (Delany 1974:393)

Acknowledging these traits in himself, Newboy says that, should he overcome them, his work “would become empty of all psychological insight” as it would “only [be] concerned with the truth ... which is trivial.”⁸ (1974:393). Of course, the question in *Dhalgren* is what is the truth? Postmodernism teaches that reality is mutable and undecidable, and that even the ‘truth’ of art is open to self-doubt. Kid suspects that he might not even be the author of his ‘own’ poems:

Are these poems mine? Or will I discover that they are improper descriptions by someone else of things I might have once been near: the map erased ... (1974:519)

When asked why he has come to Bellona, Newboy replies that the city has an “underground reputation” (1974:519), which appealed to him, as his constant exposure to the limelight of literary fame has made him “rather protective of [his] anonymity” (1974:177). Commenting on the artistic process, Newboy explains that,

⁸ A highly postmodernist point of view.

through the medium of his or her work, an artist translates some meaningful inner experience. But his emphasis on the “Artistic Community” as an Ivory Tower-type structure leads him to denounce the idea that the reader’s experience can be anything like that of the writer’s.

Dhalgren parodies this idea of the reader/artist opposition by presenting several internal texts written from first to third person, and not privileging any one as the reader remains unsure about who wrote what. By exposing the relations and interdependencies between seemingly disparate, hierarchical elements, postmodernism serves to level the literary and critical playing field. Newboy refers to Kid’s writing ability as a wound of consciousness (1974:288), which is made to bleed by the creative process, thus producing the life-affirming substance of both life and literature.

There’s no reason why all art should appeal to all people. But every editor and entrepreneur, deep in his heart of hearts is sure it does, wants it to, wishes it would. . . . Publishers, editors, gallery owners, orchestra managers! What incredible parameters for the creative world. (Delany 1974:288)

It is these creative parameters that *Dhalgren* subverts, with the main protagonist symbolising the artistic process itself as he creates and gives meaning to the very text in which he is embedded, thus subverting the centrally-focused notion of author and character. Newboy’s advice to Kid is “be true to yourself that you may be true to your work”, as well as the converse: “be true to your work so that you may be true to yourself” (1974:288) Both statements are facets of a single proposition, and postmodernism serves to highlight the supplementarity of these viewpoints.

This can also be seen as being Delany’s manifesto to himself: to be true to a work dedicated to charting the undefined waters beyond the traditional boundaries of SF. Newboy also refers to the idea of the artist as a madman or criminal, a wanderer on the edges of society transcribing the boundaries he or she transgresses. The artist has no choice but to partake of this solitary condition due to the ‘gift’ of his or her artistic consciousness, which, by its very nature of introspection and contemplation, sets the person apart from the mainstream of society. In this sense the wound of artistic consciousness is as much a site of pain and conflict as it is the wellspring of creativity and reinvention. Delany describes artistic consciousness as a ‘hole’, meaning both a wound and a void:

You begin to suspect, as you gaze through this you-shaped hole of insight and fire, that though it is the most important thing you own – never deny that for an instant – it has not shielded you from anything terribly important. The only consolation is that though one could have thrown it away at any time, morning

or night, one didn't. One chose to endure. Without any assurance of immortality, or even competence, one only knows one has not been cheated out of the consolation of carpenters, accountants, doctors, ditch-diggers, the ordinary people who must do useful things to be happy. Meander along then, half blind and a little mad (Delany 1974:291)

Given this discourse, it is surprising that Steiner comments that *Dhalgren* "could not expect much commentary" (Delany 1989:37) as it is "practically all foreground" (1984:38). Foucault distinguishes between foreground and *récit*: the former is "referential representation" – that is, describing the underlying components of the narrative, such as its physical backdrop – while the latter is "written commentary that occurs within fictive discourse" (1989:37), such as Newboy's elaboration on artistic consciousness. Granted, such discourse does not comprise the bulk of the novel, but surely it is disingenuous, and an example of the tortured vacillation of the writer who, scratching his 'wound', comments:

... it would be presumptuous for me to suggest that the language within the text was rich, complex, or worked. It may well (and from my own, most unprivileged position, despite what anyone says, I shall never know) be simply flabby, opaque and confusing. (Delany 1989:38)

This, indeed, locates the novel firmly in the postmodern moment, as the central authority attached to the text, its author, throws cold water on the extent of his artistic achievement. But the logic of the supplement dictates that this contrary view is as valid as the author's affirmation of his own work. Another underlying discourse of the novel is Delany's view of the nature and functioning of SF as a literary genre, as, at the time of starting work on *Dhalgren*, he had completed 'About Five Thousand Seven Hundred and Fifty Words', which was to become part of *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw*. This essay attempts to explain how fiction functions, with the story being what develops or accumulates as a reader takes in one word at a time, until the end of the story is reached (Delany 1977:36). The effect of this accumulation is a constant recompilation or expansion of the 'word-view' of the novel:

The process as we move our eyes from word to word is corrective and revisionary rather than progressive. Each new word revises the complex picture we had a moment before. (Delany 1977:37)⁹

Every word has a certain 'margin of meaning' in which play and difference operate. Delany argues that "a 60 000 word novel is one picture corrected 59 999 times", which is a nascent expression of his view that SF is a particular mode of

⁹ This implies that reading this dissertation, for example, is an equally accumulative process, a slow accretion building up to ... what?

reading or discourse, articulated more fully in his next novel, *Triton*. However, *Dhalgren* does represent an advance on this view as it takes into account its implicit structuralism, and extends it into the postmodernist conflation of foreground and récit, with Delany arguing that the urban landscape is “a vastly recompllicated code of human signs (or semes)” (1989:42) that can be decoded like a language:

The entire visible surface of every urban landscape we walk or ride through, as well as ninety-nine percent of the visible surface of every human being in it, is constituted of signs of specifically human actions, human reactions, class and individual histories, ordered in informative, syntactic relations. (Delany 1989:43)

Bellona, as an urban landscape, is also constituted of signs, but there is no final meaning or closure that can be arrived at, which is also a feature of postmodernism.¹⁰ Delany notes further that Karl Marx’s statement that “the means of production affect the political, spiritual, and economic life of the people” refers, in terms of literature, to the “web of commentary” (1989:43) generated by the simple description of an object

just beyond direct apprehension yet nevertheless strongly felt as one reads the texts to hand, on the politics, economics, and religion of both the material and the fictive world, charging the whole work with significance and a sense of coherent worldly knowledge. (1989:43)

The corollary of this is that Marx’s theory of the means of production can also be used to illustrate how “human-made, human-charged, and human-structured signs may be translated into its political, economic and spiritual equivalent” (1989:44). This means that a sign is much more than its constituent components of signifier and signified. It also refers to a web of sociopolitical and economic relations whereby signs are woven into the fabric of everyday life. Fox even hints that this ‘leftist’ political view of the economics of production and consumption is reflected by the fact that Kid is has no shoe on his left foot, all the lefthand pages in his notebook are blank (indicating a margin or supplement to the prevailing discourse), and he is lefthanded (1996:132) – which is plausible, but seems a bit contrived.

Another concept explicated in ‘About Five Thousand Seven Hundred and Fifty Words’ that is relevant to *Dhalgren* is Delany’s distinction between naturalistic fiction, reportage, and fantasy, which are all characterised by “a distinct level of

¹⁰ One hesitates to conclude that such a lack of closure is a defining marker that the novel is, indeed, postmodern, for not all novels that lack closure are by default postmodern. This highlights the dual problem of definition and categorisation.

subjunctivity", meaning "the tension on the thread of meaning" running between signifier and signified (1977:43). Delany uses all three different levels of subjunctivity in *Dhalgren*: for example, our experience of Bellona's bloated sun is a firsthand encounter on the part of Kid, Lanya, and Denny. It is recounted as a natural event, but is pure fantasy, as it has no scientific rationale – even the astronaut Captain Kamp, who has travelled to the moon and back and has come to Bellona for the chance to see and do new things (1974:510), is totally flummoxed. Later on the event is reported by *The Bellona Times*, which adds a different perspective, as well as legitimising the event through the authority of newsprint and journalese. During the conversation between Newboy and Kid on the nature of art and the role of the artist in society, Kid's notebook falls open at the following passage:

... The sky is stripped. I am too weak to write much. But I still hear them walking in the trees; not speaking. Waiting here, away from the terrifying weaponry, out of the halls of vapour and light, beyond holland and into the hills, I have come to. (Delany 1974:292)

Delany's comments about the importance of individual words and how they are recomplicated in a shimmering intaglio of signifieds to generate what is conventionally referred to as meaning is illustrated here by his use of the curious word 'holland'. There is a Holland Lake in Bellona, which is the location of a monastery. Fox argues against this being a typographical error, as "holland is Middle English, from the Dutch *holtlant*, meaning woodland" (1996:131). Interestingly, Delany seems to set up a nature/city dichotomy at the beginning and ending of the novel when Kid appears mysteriously from the woodlands and the hills to 'wound' the urban landscape. Nature is associated with disorder, while the urban environment is structured, but *Dhalgren* presents the opposite: it is the urban environment that is emblematic of chaos, while nature – in terms of the Daphne figure at the beginning – represents intimations of a greater order or scheme of things.

The passage quoted above, of course, is the exact ending of the novel on page 879, throwing into doubt the very meaning of an ending, as it is apparent that this particular ending has already been written, and thus has already transpired.¹¹ The reader's conventional anticipation of linear progression of a narrative is subverted, as Delany refracts the chronological and textual sequence of his novel to lay bare the devices of art. It seems that the final sentence of the novel is the missing part of the

¹¹ Derrida's comments on Maurice Blanchot are equally applicable to Delany: "The '*récit*' which he claims is beginning at the end ... is none other than the one that has begun from the beginning ... and in which, therefore, he gets around to saying that he begins, etc. And it is without beginning, or end, without content and without edge. There is only content without edge – without boundary or frame – and there is only edge without content" (1992:217).

incomplete sentence at the beginning, thus turning the novel into a seamless circularity without what can be conceived of as an ending or a beginning. Delany notes that “a circle is not the only closed figure possible to inscribe on a plain sheet of paper”, and argues that a Necker cube portrays more accurately the shifts of perspective made possible by *Dhalgren*’s structure.

A careful reading of *Dhalgren* shows that the connecting nodes of various textual modes of discourse give rise to a figure more closely resembling a Necker cube than a simple circle. The resultant shifts in authority of the various fictive planes, leaping back and forth as we observe them, are, we feel, crucial to the appreciation of *Dhalgren*. (Delany 1984:68)

The focus on the artist and the artistic process seem to suggest that *Dhalgren* is actually a modernist novel, but the way that the artistic process becomes part of the narrative, and how certain fictional functions turn into plot elements, suggests instead that it is postmodernist (the vacillation between these two interpretive or analytical modes is itself postmodernist). McHale lists some of these effects:

Bellona’s inexplicable isolation from the rest of the country, its impossibly fluid and unstable topography ... the similar instability and variability with which time unfolds there; and its spectacularly implausible astronomical phenomena ... (Delany 1987:71)

The main postmodernist device in *Dhalgren* is the internal texts it circumscribes within the larger text of the novel itself. K Leslie Steiner points out that the reader’s interpretation of, and response to, these intertexts determines his or her approach to the novel: if Kid’s journal existed prior to the novel, and his exit from Bellona is a true event, then the opening – that is, all events external to Bellona, such as the Daphne vision – are a hallucination.

If the novel existed prior to the journal, then the ending is a fiction based on the true account at the beginning. It is this conflict between truth and fiction that results in the narrative breakdown at the end, “and out of which, as we swing round to the beginning, the true fictive discourse of the book arises” (1989:75). ‘Reading’ truth or fiction into the beginning or the end is not important, but should rather be experienced as a postmodern moment, described as shifting “back and forth between possible textual authorities, like the shift between foreground and background of the vertical planes of the Necker cube” (1989:75). This shift of perspective, or deferral of meaning, highlights *Dhalgren*’s logic of the supplement, *différance* overflowing the margins of its discourse:

If Kid really entered the city, then he never truly left it.

If Kid really left the city, then he never truly entered it. (Delany 1989:75)

The highly structured and deliberate nature of the text can be illustrated by referring to the marginal entry on page 869, which is continued on page 731. The point is that Chapter VII, which is Kid's journal, is not random and disorganised, but represents a purposefully fragmented chronology meant to decentre meaning and any privileged authorial intentions. There is more than one chronology of events, and all these versions are in dialogue with each other. "These alternate chronologies play as alternate signifieds beneath the fixed signifier of the musically satisfying order of the fragments as presented in the text" (1989:78). The ultimate message of the text, if such a hierarchical or ordering concept can be allowed, is that there is no such thing as "socially privileged certain knowledge". All that we can be sure of is the paradoxes unveiled by careful reading, and the logic of the supplement, which displaces and fills out meaning at the same time. Steiner blows Delany's trumpet:

Dhalgren accomplishes the Herculean task of presenting us with a totally coherent foreground which, by the fictive geodesics it establishes throughout the contours of its fictive field, allows not one plane of meaning to hold to any one single level. The task of treating the major problem of modern aesthetics in such a rich and recomplicated model in the already deprivileged field of science fiction is certainly an impressive undertaking. Symbolically what the concert of *Dhalgren*'s illusions says is that we cannot trust too deeply in any socially privileged certain knowledge. All we may trust are our own readings of the paradoxes of the world, until we encounter evidence that things are not as we have thought, and our reading drops into the background and a new reading springs to the fore. (Delany 1989:79)

This is all very well, but it can be argued that the novel boils down to postmodernism for postmodernism's sake. Just as Kid wonders where Bellona's centre is (1974:425), what is *Dhalgren* saying that is radically different – bearing in mind that Delany's mission is not just to be different, but to cross boundaries and turn them into frontiers? As said earlier, Delany refutes the notion that the novel is not SF, arguing that it partakes of one its central themes, that of parallel or alternate realities. Indeed, Tak says that he suspects the "whole thing" – implying the situation in Bellona – is SF.

'Huh? You mean a time-warp, or a parallel universe?'

'No, just ... well, science fiction. Only real. It follows all the conventions.' (Delany 1974:415)

Kid is unconvinced by this argument as he has not seen any spaceships or ray-guns, symbols of the epistemological shock of the new which signify SF to him. Tak

replies that he obviously has not “read the new, good stuff” (1974:415),¹² implying that SF has something of a disreputable past. Kid elaborates on the ‘three conventions’ of SF: first, that the course of an entire world can be changed by a single person; second, that “the only measure of intelligence or genius is its linear and practical application” and, thirdly, that “the Universe is an essentially hospitable place” (1974:415).

Thus Bellona is like an undiscovered, habitable planet budding with promise and ripe for the plucking. The fact that Kid is unable to identify with this view is “a comment on the paucity of our imaginations – none at all on the wonders here for the taking” (1974:415). With “nothing safe about the darkness of this city” (1974:24), which is “without definitions” (1974:44), Bellona seems to represent a slowly unfolding disaster zone or site of some incomprehensible cataclysm that has affected the nature of space/time itself.

The city is also a larger representation of Kid’s ‘wound’ – its seeming chaos and lack of form are the raw material of potentiality, of transformation of the prevailing social order, of crossing the boundary enfolding us within the normative ambit of society. Everything in Bellona is free for the taking, and thus even the nature of crime has changed, with gangs like the Scorpions living in ‘nests’ and stalking the city in defense of their perceived territory, adorned in hologrammatic light shields representing a gamut of animal shapes.

That Kid himself does not understand the extent of the collapse or compaction of civilisation in Bellona is evidenced by the fact that he accepts a paying job with the Richards family to help them move to a more desirable location in their apartment building. Mrs Richards’s response to anarchy and entropy is to pretend that, if she ignores them like unwanted visitors, they will eventually lose interest and leave her alone. Her belief in the prevailing social order is so strong that “suddenly you begin to feel she’s changing the world into her own ideas” (1974:194), reminding us that a prevailing discourse is only as powerful as the strength of the belief that sustains it.

Kid’s singular revolutionary act – though this is not how he perceives it – is to enter into a three-way relationship with Lanya and Denny, the consummation of which is described in graphic, though never lurid – and surprisingly tender – detail. The remarkable thing about the description of these three-way sexual encounters in *Dhalgren* is that they are grounded in a mundane level of reality – genitals, body fluids, endearments, mutual pleasures and passion – that it seems, and becomes to be in the course of the novel, perfectly normal. Heterosexual monogamy is the privileged sexual discourse in mainstream society, and Delany subverts this status quo by

¹² Perhaps referring to Delany’s own work?

presenting a transgressive alternative in the very language of the privileged discourse itself. The trio represent a deeply subversive affront to social norms as they not only cross the explicit boundary defining the nuclear family, but their complex interrelationship also decentres the phallocentrism that is fundamental to any heterosexual coupling.

Delany also tackles the controversial issue of interracial sex and violence against women in the figure of George Harrison, who is notorious in Bellona for having raped June Richards, the daughter of the family Kid works for. Harrison is an underground celebrity in Bellona, with nude posters of himself being circulated among admirers. He is a symbol of power and virility, with sexuality being the other side of the coin of artistic creativity. When a double moon rises inexplicably in Bellona's sky, one is named George in honour of Harrison.

So you have seen the moon! So you have seen George – the right and left testicles of God, so heavy with tomorrow they tore through the veil to dangle naked above us all? (1974:524)

It transpires that the 'rape' had been concocted by those "afraid of female sexuality, and trying to make it into something that wreaks death and destruction all about it" (1974:277). Kid shudders to think of Mr Richards's reaction "if he found out his sunshine girl was running around the streets like a bitch in heat, lusting to be brutalised by some hulking, sadistic, buck nigger" (Delany 1974:278).

Harrison is a broad parody of a particular black stereotype, and Delany uses that stereotype itself as the main features of George's character in order to decontextualise such characteristics. In this sense, the decimated Bellona can be seen to symbolise the ravaged inner city ghettos of the great American cities, which are populated largely by blacks. Another stereotype is Bunny, the gay go-go dancer at Teddy's, who espouses the philosophy of "radical effeminism" (1974:359). Delany's choice of character names – Captain Kamp, Purple Angora, Ernest Newboy¹³ – suggests that the dominant features of the peripheral characters of *Dhalgren* are pastiche and irony. This is because Bellona is the font of signification, where all such stereotypes are levelled on the linguistic playing field of postmodernism. Literary playfulness aside, the issues of black and gay consciousness are crucial to a proper understanding of *Dhalgren*, and the trinity of Kid, Lanya, and Denny represents an amalgamation of these arbitrary social divisions based on race (Kid is American Indian) and sexual orientation.

¹³ This could be an echo of Thomas Pynchon's 'parodic names'.

At the beginning of the novel, Kid is given an orchid, a bladed bracelet, as a weapon, which he rarely takes off.

Kid was completely astonished when Denny's hands joined hers, and with no clumsiness, the blades opened, fell away: the harness was lifted from his tingling wrist.

Lanya put it on the window ledge by the blind, where it stood, upright, a long, bright crown. (Delany 1974:466)

The image of the weapon being transformed into a symbolic crown is emblematic of the larger transformation that Bellona enacts not only on its urban landscape, but on the people who inhabit it as well. The Reverend Amy Taylor (whose church distributes the erotic posters of George Harrison as a social service) exhorts her congregation in a sermon:

Pray that this city is the one, pure, logical space from which, without being a poet or a god, we can all actually leave ... (Delany 1974:536)

This space, or "lingual gap" (1974:175), is the tyranny of signification itself, which cements meanings and social divisions and the societal structures they inscribe. This theme is expanded further in *Stars*, featuring Delany's other great 'lost' character, Rat Korga, who is deprived of the entire world he inhabits. If *Dhalgren* can be said to still fall near, or under, the shadow of modernism due to its obvious Joycean parallels, such as the open ending and beginning, then *Stars* is a truly modern postmodern novel. In terms of SF, it represents perhaps the culmination of Delany's engagement with poststructuralism. The novel also revisits the particular field of SF that Delany explored in *Babel-17*, namely space opera, as well as one of his most persistent themes: the nature of language, and how it structures society and our relation towards it.

The plot of *Stars* is simple to the point of parody: Delany imagines a galaxy-spanning structure known as the Federation of Habitable Worlds, which comprises about 6 000 planets (1984b:94), and is referred to colloquially as the Web. All the worlds are linked by GI or General Information, a sort of galactic Internet that anyone can tap into by thought alone. There are two main competing forms of social organisation in the Federation, referred to as the Sygn and the Family. In a prologue entitled 'A World Apart', Delany recounts the slavery of Rat Korga on the planet Rhyonon, the backwardness of which is reflected by the fact that it is not linked to GI. Korga also has a learning difficulty, and is subjected to the lobotomising process of radical anxiety termination, the acronym of which becomes his name.¹⁴

¹⁴ Like Kid in *Dhalgren*, this highlights the arbitrary nature of signs, as 'Rat' is not his real name.

Just before Rhyonon is destroyed by Cultural Fugue, a term to describe the cumulative result of social and political tensions, Korga is rescued by the Web. He happens to be the perfect erotic object of one Marq Dyeth, an “industrial diplomat₁” from the planet Velm, which is affiliated with the Sygn, and becomes a pawn in a complex galactic interplay. Damien Broderick succinctly – if rather glibly – summarises the plot as “boy loses world, boy meets boy, boy loses boy, boy saves world” (1995:142). This sounds simple enough, but Martha Bartter points out immediate problems that arise. The conventional model of textuality is based on the fact that the reader derives the story from what the author tells us, and how he or she tells it. Thus we take the template of the text and base it on our own perceived social reality: “The better the fit, the better we ‘understand’ the story, and the more apt we are to enjoy it” (1990:327).

It is precisely this lack of convergence with social reality that led many readers to reject *Dhalgren* as being “essentially implottable” (1990:328). The problematic nature of *Stars* is signposted by its structure: a prologue, a section of 13 chapters or monologues entitled ‘Visible and Invisible Persons Distributed in Space’, and an epilogue. The “novella-length third-person” (Broderick 1995:140) prologue seems totally adrift from the main body of the text: Rat Korga and his world are introduced in great detail, only for him to disappear and re-emerge briefly on the periphery of the main events, while the main section does not read like a series of monologues, and is narrated in the past tense.

Key elements of the plot and character motivations are either ignored or left open, with the promised second novel of the diptych, entitled *The Splendour and Misery of Bodies, of Cities*, yet to appear (a brief extract was featured in the autumn 1996 edition of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, at least confirming the existence of a sequel).¹⁵ However, Bartter refutes the criticism that “Delany has forgotten how to construct a plot, or that his interest in critical theory has irretrievably poisoned his writing ability” (1990:328). This speaks for SF readers who are frustrated by Delany’s frustration of the conventions of space opera, which are unambiguous and far from open-ended. Broderick’s initial assessment of the novel suggests the best way to approach the text:

Delany has written a novel as heavily concentrated on *récit*, on nuanced observation of social interaction and its meaning, as any by Jane Austen or Thomas Mann. ... *Stars* is a strikingly postmodernist science fiction text, a

¹⁵ Delany comments: “In the rather darker second volume, I hope to show that subversion is more apparent than actual – precisely because it is *not* analysed, because it is *not* deconstructed” (1994a:212).

place where the tropes of the other intersect with the tropes of overlay and repetition, of pastiche and subversion by rhetorical overkill. (1995:142)

Bray comments that the Web, “the fictional organisation that oversees the flow of information in the galaxy and seems also to oversee the evolution of galactic civilisation” (1996:153) is an adumbration of the ‘web as textus’ idea put forward in *Triton*, “signing the fabric upon which text is printed as well as the fibre of which it is spun” (Bray 1996:153). When Rat is purchased illegally by a woman to be her slave forever, she fits him with a glove-like neural device that bypasses the damage of the radical anxiety termination, and enables him to perceive GI as “a web, a text weaving endlessly about him” (1984b:53). Thus the Web refers to the social structure of the Federation, and the rich informational substructure it is grounded in through GI, “brooding like a semiotic oracle over the cultures which employ it and those which refuse its service” (1984b:151). An obvious implication of the GI system is that, with hegemonic control over the flow of information, the Web defines the very nature of social organisation in the Federation, with the bulk of its citizens reading an invisibly inscribed text through their lives. The neural device lets Korga partake of this living text:

All sensations, as well as the faintest memories associated with them, were given a word and three written versions of it, in syllabics, alphabetics, and ideographs, each of which dragged behind it connections, associations, resonances (Delany 1984b:53)

This refers to the Derridean concept of ‘play’, where signification is not merely a one-to-one association between signifier and signified, but a constant deferring of meaning through difference and contrast. The key to understanding the web that the text weaves, and the Web it inscribes, is language, which Marq Dyeth notes is mutable under social pressures, as indicated by the fact that the word ‘he’, for example, signifies differently on different worlds. The basic question to gauge the differentiation of this signification is: “What’s the special meaning of ‘he’ among the women of that part of that world?” (1984b:98).

Immediately the reader is confused, for Delany seems to have conflated the terms of common sexual differentiation. However, just as the Web has two different, and competing, forms of social organisation in the Family and the Sygn, so does it have two diverging languages. Standard English is the mode of communication for those sentient species with two sexes, where the term ‘he’ indicates patriarchal privileging and phallocentrism. But for those societies of the 6 000 worlds of the Federation that are alien and/or have more than two sexes, Arachnia is the preferred mode of communication, which again suggests that language is like a spider-spun

web. The gender convention of *Arachnia* is that all sentient beings of whatever species or gender are 'women', "taking the pronouns 'she' and 'her' except when the entity referred to by an individual is an object of 'her' sexual excitement, when 'he' is appropriate" (Broderick 1995:143). The effect of this is "declaring publicly those states of personal, intimate desire which our culture treats as private and protected" (1995:143–44).

Delany has taken the basic structuralist maxim that the relation between signifier and signified is arbitrary, and turned it into a poststructuralist play on the gender conventions that underpin society as we know it, and which determine the hierarchical power structure that privileges the male, and marginalises everything outside its ambit. This makes *Stars* a much more convoluted reading experience than *Dhalgren*, for example, as the surface meaning of the text cannot be taken at face value, with the reader having to trace the very fibres of meaning in the web of the text.

Characters called women in *Stars* are most often not female and frequently not humans. Nor can readers automatically envision human males in picturing scenes that use the word he. Both new categories demand perception and increased attention to text. Without habitual linguistic cues, descriptive details provided are not always sufficient for readers to picture a character as alien or human, for instance. (Broderick 1995:154)

It is clear that language is an area of contestation in the Web, as indicated by the following exchange between Korga and Marq Dyeth. Korga has been entangled in the Web long enough to realise that his home planet, Rhyonon – indeed a 'world apart' as indicated by the title of the prologue – is the exception rather than the norm. It is much closer to our own society than the worlds of the Web, and is thus the syntagmatic starting point for the SF elucidation of an alternative lifestyle that follows.

'Don't you ever persecute people here for their sex?'
 'Oh no,' I said. 'I mean, I told you, a long time ago, in the north –'
 'The language,' he said. 'That's what I mean.' (Delany 1984b:270)

The main area of contestation is the division between the Family and the Sygn, which are the "two contrasting models for social structure at play in the novel" (Bray 1996:155). The important word here is 'play', as it suggests the differential interface between the two structures. The Family is described as "trying to establish the dream of a classic past as pictured on a world that may never even have existed in order to achieve cultural stability" (1984b:112). This world, of course, is Earth, whose similarity to Rhyonon has been lost in time, and it has instead been romanticised as

the cradle of galactic civilisation. By privileging one world over the thousands of others in the Web, the Family reveals its focus on logocentric hierarchy. In total contrast to this 'closed-system' view, where cultural stability is a hard-fought-for victory, and has to be cemented in social structure (and strictures, for stasis is an obvious outcome of this view), the Sygn is a dynamic plurality celebrating difference wherever it finds it as an enriching medium for growth:

... with the Sygn committed to the living interaction and difference between each woman and each world from which the right stability and play may flower, in a universe where both information and misinformation are constantly suspect, reviewed and drifting as they must be (constantly) by and between the two, a moment when either information or misinformation turns out to be harmless must bloom, when surrounded by the workings of desire and terror, into the offered sign of all about it, making and marking all about it innocent by contamination. (Delany 1984b:112–113)

This ornately convoluted description is typical of Delany's prose in *Stars*, and is in total contrast to the heightened realism employed in *Dhalgren*. It is interesting that, just like Derrida's term *différance*, the Sygn is only discernible as a signifier. Its adherents seem to suggest that the model of social organisation it represents is as natural and inevitable as meaning flowing from language. The Sygn acknowledges that it is not perfect, but neither does it strive to be, for 'misinformation' has its place in the scheme of things as an arbiter of difference. This social model is premised on the notion that diversity is the very fibre of the relational web that holds it together. Of course, the Sygn must have a sign – in keeping with Delany's postmodern play on arbitrary signifiers – and this is the 'cyhmk'. Broderick notes mischievously that

the Sygn are a kind of poststructuralist religion. Their insignia or floating signifier is the 'cyhmk', described variously (what else?) but often having a form readable as unity-in-diversity: it is at once a sign, an ankh, the synchronic and, not impossibly, the kitchen sink. (1995:149)

Of course, the meaning or signification of the cyhmk is not as simple as a one-to-one relation to the Sygn, with there seeming to be as many different cyhnks as there are worlds or dogmas – though each version or interpretation adds up to the signified totality of the Sygn.

... on many worlds the cyhmk signifies ... a difference between one cyhmk and another. But on other worlds ... it signified the difference between one cyhmk and another, the difference between the myriad kinds of cyhnks that exist on myriad worlds, the difference between the myriad dogmas, each one different for each different part of each different world, that make up the institution so frequently known as the Sygn. (Delany 1984b:172)

'Institution' is a curiously concrete word for as slippery a signified as the Sygn, but perhaps it is an indication of the web of meaning it spins that it can embrace such a term as well. It is the fate of Korga that, having survived the Cultural Fugue that destroyed his (admittedly backward) world, the web of signification that endlessly defers the meaning of the Sygn transforms him into the 'living sign' for the "possibility of surviving it". The only survivor of an entire world – which, in the grand tradition of space opera, is destroyed in a few sentences – Korga literally becomes a transcendental signified, a tabula rasa upon which the Sygn can inscribe its ongoing clash with the Family, which "is in the process of creating a schism throughout the entire galaxy, concerning just what exactly a woman is" (1984:249).

This echoes one of the enduring themes of *Dhalgren*, namely that of the nature of sexuality, and how it is inscribed by gender and social stereotypes. The Thants from Zetzor, which represent the Family, criticise Velm, the home of Marq Dyeth and representative of the Sygn, for its 'licentious' custom of dedicating open 'runs' to sexual intercourse for the use of different species. The Family sees this as perversion and contamination, in contrast to their "older, purer, human" (Delany 1984b:407) way. They fail to see that they are merely buttressing a crumbling status quo that is out of keeping with the times (not to mention the very multiplicity of the Federation), and are rejecting the rejuvenating force of difference, which binds the strands of the Web together, and at the same time keeps them apart so as to make space for the logic of the supplement.

The novel ends inconclusively and abruptly, as there can obviously be no resolution to the Family/Sygn schism, as it represents a social dialectic. Our final glimpse of Marq Dyeth is on a colony ship en route to some nameless destination. The one certainty that he does glimpse ever so briefly is the endless play of the signified universe, whereby "to leave one part of a world in order to visit another is to indulge in a transformation of signs, their appearances, their meanings". Marq Dyeth has been touched by the transformative power of difference, and contemplates the symbolism of renewal and deferral of meaning associated with leaving a world at dawn:

But to leave a world, and to leave it at dawn, thus delaying all possibility of what one might learn in a day, is to experience precisely the problematics of that identity at its most intense: to see that identity shatter, fragment, and to realise that its solidity was always an illusion, and that infinite spaces between those referential shards are more opaque to direct human apprehension than all the star-flooded vacuum. (Delany 1984b:451)

Marq Dyeth realises that identity is as much a construct as the Web itself and, even though Korga was found to be his perfect erotic object "out to about seven

decimal places” (1984b:225), he is still unable to piece together the “referential shards” that make up his identity due to the “infinite spaces” between them, which is the signifiatory space where *différance* endlessly defers meaning. Marq Dyeth contemplates the nature of meaning, which is an accumulative process of shifts, displacements, and uncertainties (1984b:53). For example, he takes the metaphor of ‘dawn rising’, and the immediate associative image it evokes. But the planet Klyvos “keeps a single face towards its sun and is therefore surrounded by an unmoving band of half-light”, while its human inhabitants refer to the symbol of chyani as the planet’s “eternal circle of morning” (1984b:461):

... it serves as a metaphor for chaos, for violence leading to no end, for Cultural Fugue itself – not so much destruction ending in death, but rather the perpetual and unremitting destruction of both nature and intelligence run wild and without focus, where anything so trivial and natural as either death or birth is irrelevant. (Delany 1984b:461)

This concept is similar to that of ‘ekpyrosis’ in *The Mad Man*, the “Heraclitean notion of change and flux raised to such a level beyond flux or rage that nothing can escape it, that no man’s or woman’s flow can quench it” (Delany 1994b:480). It is from the dry flint of chyani or ekpyrosis that signification strikes the spark of meaning. While bemoaning the fact that this realisation has robbed his own world of its uniquely-perceived particularity, Marq Dyeth’s vision of the universe embraces the full implication of the philosophy of the Sygn: a celebration of total difference and absence of centredness or structured meaning. The supplement to this is that the Family, represented by the Thants, wishes to prevent the Web from realising its true potential. And poised between these opposing dialectical tensions is the embryonic relationship between Korga and Marq Dyeth, which gives new meaning to the phrase ‘star-crossed lovers’.¹⁶ The novel ends with an affirmation of the infinitude and richness of the universe, implying the process of signification itself:

... can you know anything about my home, my world, the universe in which I live? It’s a beautiful universe ... wondrous and the more exciting because no one has written plays and poems and built sculptures to indicate the structure of desire I negotiate every day as I move about in it. It’s a universe where hands and faces are all luminous, all attractive, all open for infinite contemplation (Delany 1984b:455)

It is assumed that a social structure such as the Federation must have a centre or point of origin, with the Family focusing on an idealised Earth as their signifiatory anchor point. But the alternative name for the Federation, the Web, suggests that there

¹⁶ Though not exactly the kind that Shakespeare had in mind.

might not be a centre at all, with the structure held together simply by the tension between its various components. 'Structure' and 'centre' are key concepts in both poststructuralism and postmodernism, and need to be examined further. Derrida writes of the 'rupture' or 'redoubling' that occurred in Western philosophical thought when the concept of the "structurality of structure" came into play (1978:279). When it became generally understood that language itself was a structure, it became possible to conceive of the idea of structure itself, and how all systems are structured (Klages 1999). This was the instant when "philosophers began to see their philosophical systems not as absolute truth, but as systems, as constructs, as structures" (1999).

Derrida points out that any structure has a centre, as this is what holds it together, and organises it, as a cohesive and coherent system (Derrida 1978:278). The centre is the crucial component of any structure, as it represents the point where nothing further can be substituted (Klages 1999). However, the centre also "closes off the play which it opens up and makes possible" (Derrida 1978:279):

The function of this centre [is] not only to orient, balance, and organise the structure – one cannot in fact conceive of an unorganised structure – but above all to make sure that the organising principle of the structure would limit what we might call the play of the structure. (Derrida 1978:278)

'Play' is anathema to structure because it replaces solid foundations with linguistic quicksand. The centre is seen to organise the coherence of a particular system so as to "permit the play of its elements inside the total form" (Derrida 1978:279) – that is, to harness or control the degree of play, which is unescapable as the supplement of structure. However, the "permutation or the transformation of elements" is not allowed at the centre, as this would dilute its essence and render it ambiguous, and therefore contradict the very notion of structure itself. This means that the centre enjoys a privileged position in structurality, as it is "that very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality" (Derrida 1978:278). The implication is, paradoxically, that the centre is simultaneously inside and outside the structure, requiring a shift of perspective like the Necker cube which Steiner uses to explain the circularity of *Dhalgren*'s plot.

The centre is at the centre of the totality, and yet, since the centre does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its centre elsewhere. The centre is not the centre. (Derrida 1978:279)

Both Kid, who wonders where the centre of Bellona is, and Marq Dyeth, who comes to the realisation that the privileged centre of his existence, his home world, is but one of 6 000 planets in the totality of the Web, assimilate this fundamental

postmodern realisation: that the concept of a centred structure is inherently incoherent, or “contradictorily coherent” (1978:279).

The concept of centred structure is in fact the concept of a play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude, which is itself beyond the reach of play. And on the basis of this certitude anxiety can be mastered, for anxiety is invariably the result of a certain mode of being implicated in the game, of being caught in the game, of being as it were at stake in the game from the outset. (Derrida 1978:279)

This play, this game, is the decentred essence of both Bellona and the Web, which means that the very concept of structure has to be redefined “as a series of substitutions of centre for centre, as a linked chain of determinations of the centre” (1978:279). Like *différance*, the centre is not a fixed location, but should rather be perceived of as a function or a process, “a sort of nonlocus in which an infinite number of sign substitutions came into play” (1978:280). Derrida marks this moment as the instant when “language invaded the universal problematic, the moment when, in the absence of a centre or origin, everything became discourse” (1978:280), and is

... a system in which the central signified, the original or transcendental signified, is never absolutely present outside a system of differences. The absence of the transcendental signified extends the domain and the play of signification infinitely. (Derrida 1978:280)

The ‘transcendental signified’ is the “ultimate source of meaning, which cannot be represented (or substituted) by any adequate signifier” (Klages 1999). An example is God: some religions have no written or spoken name for God, and yet God is the ultimate referent of all signifiers in this regard, as He created the system. Another example is an author, which represents the ultimate organising principle of a text. How, then, does one think about systems and centres without falling into the same trap of making a new system with its own centre? Both *Dhalgren* and *Stars* present a postmodern answer to this problem: the systems they circumscribe – namely, the city of Bellona and the Web of the Federation – have no really discernible centres, and even where these might be located are thrown into doubt and ambiguity.¹⁷

The crucial problem is that any particular system cannot be discussed without using its own particular terms of reference. For example, one might take the concept of the sign: the only way that it can be claimed that any semiotic system lacks a transcendental signified, implying that all signs have free play or infinite ranges of

¹⁷ This is seen in the absence of any government structures or officials in the Web.

meaning, is to use the word 'sign', which does, indeed, have a fixed meaning. "And then you are back in the system you are trying to 'deconstruct'" (Klages 1999).

As an example of such a rupture in the contiguity of the perception of structure, Derrida points to Levi-Strauss's discovery that incest is a universal prohibition in that every culture has such a prohibition, but it is also specific in that every culture defines this prohibition on its own terms. "So how can something be both universal and particular, nature and culture?" questions Klages (1999). She says that this is the "heart of deconstruction":

... deconstruction looks for binary pairs of oppositions – things that are supposed to stay neatly on their own side of a slash. Then they look for places, or examples, where something disrupts that neat slash – something that fits on both sides ... (1999)

As soon as this happens, it is possible to deconstruct a system. Structure depends on binary oppositions for stability, and, if these are challenged, then it puts into play all the elements of the system (1999). This opens up two courses of action: first, one can jettison the entire structure as being fatally flawed, or one can attempt to reconstitute the structure without any inconsistencies. But Derrida has already shown that this essentially means "substituting one centre for another", and therefore is not a workable option. The second course of action is to "keep using the structure, but to recognise that it is flawed" (1999). This means no longer applying a 'truth value' to a structure or system, but seeing a particular system as a construct focused on a central idea holding it together (Derrida 1978:284). Derrida uses Levi-Strauss's terms of *bricolage* (the method) and *bricoleur* (the person doing it):

The *bricoleur* ... is someone who uses 'the means at hand', that is, the instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous – and so forth. There is therefore a critical language in the form of *bricolage*, and it has even been said that *bricolage* is critical language itself. (1978:285)¹⁸

¹⁸ Delany notes: "The French *bricoleur* is a figure who is not really a part of the American landscape. The closest translation we can make is 'handyman.' But he is also a plumber, a carpenter, and an electrical repairman as well. His job is to solve whatever problems arise. His tools are available materials. The engineer takes a problem and, applying overarching principles to it, works down to the specific, well-formed solution. Contrastingly, the *bricoleur* starts with the local problem, solves one part, then the next, until often rather quirky, Rube-Goldberg-style structures arise, which nevertheless can be both stable and efficient" (1999:152).

Delany himself can be seen as a *bricoleur*, as he is not interested in reifying the concept of the system itself, but in understanding how the different elements signify the totality of a particular system. This system, of course, is SF, and the elements itself are its generic themes and tropes. On a more fundamental level, this takes Delany to the very organisation of language itself, producing a complex *bricolage* or discourse of literary theory and generic dissection. Opposed to the *bricoleur* is the concept of the engineer. Whereas the former does not subscribe to the notion of absolute truth, and is only concerned with the coherency of systems, the latter is only interested in stable systems that have little or no play, and considers him- or herself as the centre of his or her own particular discourse (Klages 1999). Derrida argues that the engineer “is a myth produced by the *bricoleur*”, and that “every finite discourse is bound by a certain *bricolage*” (1978:285).

The engineer can be said to be an expression of the idea of totalisation, which is the desire “to have a system, a theory, a philosophy, that explains everything”, such as the Puritan belief that God is at the centre of the universe (Klages 1999). Derrida argues that this is impossible, simply because any single system may have too many divergent elements to account for. The fact that all the disparate elements cannot be fixed and measured means that there is too much play in the system for totalisation to be possible:

If totalisation no longer has any meaning, it is not because the infiniteness of a field cannot be covered by a finite glance or a finite discourse, but because the nature of the field – that is, language and a finite language – excludes totalisation. This field is in effect that of *play* ... (Derrida 1978:289)

This ‘play’ becomes infinite in the absence of a centre, and is limited or eliminated in its presence. This is the divide between which all systems fall, leading Derrida to highlight the concept of the supplementarity of the centre. The sign which replaces the centre in its absence is added as a supplement or a surplus, and therefore prevents totalisation, because it is an undecidable element:

... this movement of play, permitted by the lack or absence of a centre or origin, is the movement of *supplementarity*. One cannot determine the centre and exhaust totalisation because the sign which replaces the centre, which supplements it, taking the centre’s place in its absence – this sign is added, occurs as a surplus, as a *supplement*. (Derrida 1978:289)

Derrida adds that “the *overabundance* of the signifier, its *supplementary* character, is thus the result of a finitude, that is to say, the result of a lack which must be *supplemented*” (1978:290). This leads to a tension between play and presence, with the latter defined as the stability or fixity emanating from the centre. Something can be said to be fully present when it is stable or fixed, as opposed to being provisional or mobile, with the concept of play signifying the disruption of presence (Klages 1999). The idea of play can be approached with a nostalgic mourning for the loss of the fixity of meaning, and a longing to return to simple beliefs like God being at the centre of the universe (or the Author at the centre of a text). “Or you can play along, rejoice in multiplicity and affirm the provisional nature of all meaning” (1999):

... the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and of the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth, and without origin which is offered to an active interpretation. (Derrida 1978:292)

In ‘Omegahelm’, a short story written in 1973, Delany adds substance to Vondramach, an important historical figure in *Stars*, which, of course, was published in 1984 – signifying a gap of 11 years between the two. The short story contains important details elaborated upon in *Stars*, such as nurture streams, primary and secondary jobs, the concept of the family, and sygnns and cyhnks:

‘It is only a sygn, Vondra,’ Gylde said, as one repeats the obvious to one who has rejected it long ago. ‘A signifier, they used to say, whose meaning – whose signified – shifts from place to place, world to world, person to person.’ (1991b:317)

‘Omegahelm’ serves to disrupt the reader’s perception of *Stars* as a coherent totality functioning within, and defined by, its own particular discourse. The short story, in effect, displaces the novel as being the centre of its own discourse, for it is a supplement. It reveals *Stars* as being part of a process of discourse, and not as a hermeneutically-sealed entity conceived of, and bound by, the covers of a single book. And this process of discourse is ongoing, moving both backwards and forwards in an endless chain of signification, where the separate links are the books, stories, and other media, forming the chain of the author’s career. Both *Dhalgren* and *Stars* are part of the same discourse, helping, in turn, to decentre the author himself as the transcendental signified of his own work. This is Delany’s truly postmodern

affirmation: a rejection of totality as the essence of sterile stability, and the rejection of the centre as the anchor of that stability. And as Derrida states, this must not be mourned as a loss of transcendental meaning, but as a joyous acceptance of active interpretation.

Chapter Five

Writers and Lovers

In April 1998, Delany was awarded the University of Massachusetts's (UMass's) Chancellor's Medal, "the highest campus honour bestowed on individuals who have rendered exemplary and extraordinary service to the university" (Beeber 1999). Carey Goldberg remarks that "it is one more stranger-than-truth" aspect of Delany's life that, though he dropped out of college after a single semester, he was a tenured professor at UMass, as well as being acting head of the comparative literature department for two terms (Beeber 1999). The presentation of the award at the university's Distinguished Faculty Lecture Series, where Delany delivered an address entitled 'An Inquiry into Some Modes of Urban Sociality' (Beeber 1999), marked an extraordinary point in his career to date.

Commenting on the recessionary state of the American publishing industry, Goldberg points out that, despite having two Hugo and four Nebula awards under his belt – SF's highest honours – and having inspired "a small secondary industry of books by others who interpret his work" (1999),¹ Delany was still unable to make ends meet as a writer. Beeber explains that Delany was a victim of the radical downsizing of the American publishing industry in the 1980s, which saw twelve of the author's novels – in print for 20 years – "dropped like dead wood" (1999), with the number of publishers in New York City declining from 79 in 1980 to only about fifteen at present.

Living in a rundown apartment in urgent need of painting, Delany commuted by bus to Amherst, where he taught comparative literature for three days a week (Beeber 1999).² Beeber quotes Delany as stating that, in 1988, when he became "a casualty of publishing flatliners", he was "very generously and graciously pursued" by UMass, which "called looking for someone with his teaching credentials, publishing record and a vita full of critical writings" (1999). Since then the academic press, most notably the Wesleyan University Press, has reissued the bulk of Delany's work, beginning in 1996 and including new essay and fiction collections (1999). Writing in *The New York Times* in 1996, Goldberg commented that, "rescued by enthusiastic new publishers, [Delany] appears poised for a resurgence" (1999):

¹ Goldberg quotes Delany: "'I have what I call my 'Delany five-and-a-half-inch bookshelf' of books about me ... Those and \$1.50 will get you a ride on the New York City subway'" (1999).

² A synopsis of Delany's latest book, *1984*, on Amazon.com notes that the author currently has a professorship in English at the University of Buffalo, New York.

Even as his science fiction undergoes something of a renaissance, though, Delany is moving away from that genre ... focusing more lately on historical fiction, essays and criticism.

"When you live in interesting times, you tend to write about what's going on," he said. (Beeber 1999)

Goldberg also noted Delany's foray into "what one critic called 'promiscuous autobiographising'" (1999), referring to *The Motion of Light in Water*, published in 1990, and winner of the Hugo award for best non-fiction title of the year. Despite Delany's contention that the times he lived in were interesting enough to write about, his autobiography's subtitle, 'East Village Sex and Science Fiction Writing: 1960–1965',³ centred on a pre-HIV/AIDS world, celebrating the bacchanalian element in his life, and exhorting society literally to seize the day. Given his penchant for including autobiographical elements in his writing,⁴ *The Mad Man* (1994) however contained the following purposeful disclaimer:

The Mad Man is a work of fiction – and fairly imaginative fiction at that. No character, major or minor, is intended to represent any actual person, living or dead. (Correspondences are not only coincidental but preposterous). Nor are any of its scenes laid anywhere representing actual establishments or institutions. (Delany 1994b:xiii)

This apparent contradiction between 'promiscuous' autobiographising on the one hand, and uncharacteristic and puzzling reticence on the other, points to a larger contestatory margin that Delany is operating in at present. He is being showered with praise by academia, with a noted critic of his work, David Samuelson of California State University, hailing Delany as the James Joyce of science fiction, while yet another scholar has referred to him as "America's answer to Michel Foucault" (Goldberg 1999). However, Capper Nichols points out that, not only has Delany's audience becoming increasingly specialised, but that it is shrinking (1996:149). Goldberg remarks that Delany's recent output, such as *The Mad Man* and *Bread and Wine*, "go so deeply into the kinkiest of sex that even his most devoted fans slam them closed" (1999). Nichols articulates the crux of the debate:

However, is my interest in and fascination ... the interest and fascination of a graduate student in literature – a symptom of a shrinking and

³ The Arbor House/William Morrow edition of 1988 was subtitled 'Sex and Science Fiction Writing in the East Village 1957–1965', while the revised Paladin edition of 1990 saw the dates in the subtitle changed to '1960–1965'. It is unclear what prompted Delany to revise the text.

⁴ But is autobiography a transparent medium giving an uninterrupted view of the writer's thoughts and intentions? Despite Delany's candour, for example, the reader never really gets close to the truth of why he separated from Marilyn Hacker, or how he 'came out'. Perhaps this is because the story becomes refracted and opaque, like the motion of light in water.

specialised audience for Delany's work? Does his more recent work appeal only to those who, like me, are part of academia? For some readers it seems the answer to these questions is yes. Over the last couple of years – at an SF convention in Minneapolis, an academic conference in Riverside, California, and at various bookstores – I've heard again and again that Delany's earlier work was 'real' SF, that this stuff he's been doing for the last ten years or so ... is just some kind of academese, that he's been corrupted by his time spent working at various universities and has gone off the intellectual deep end, that his work is unreadable, too experimental, too theory-laden, too inaccessible. (1996:149)

In this chapter I will attempt to show that, far from having gone off the deep end, works such as *The Motion of Light in Water* and *The Mad Man* are an integral component of Delany's artistic output, and are indeed extensions and amplifications of some of the themes and issues raised in his SF and fantasy novels. I believe that the fact that there is such disparity at present between Delany's critical and popular reception indicates "an audience wanting an artist to produce more of the same kind of work, resisting any change in direction" (Nichols 1996:149). Nichols says this points to a lack of discernment or maybe even sophistication on the part of Delany's reading audience (1996:150). For example, readers were taken aback when he seemingly abandoned SF and resorted to sword-and-sorcery in the Nevèryon series, but failed to realise that the strong structuralist and poststructuralist concerns voiced in this series could be traced back to Delany's first novels.

Nichols writes approvingly of Delany's increasing tendency to "insert himself into his narratives", as this "involves very self-conscious and explicit discussions of the process of making fiction, of making meaning", as well as focusing on the minutiae of his own life (1996:150). However, readers in general disagree, arguing that Delany's oeuvre has become "too (lengthily) autobiographical, that he's given up fiction" (1996:150). Nichols concedes this point, stating that the Nevèryon books, for example, "don't inscribe transparent, modernist fictional narratives" (1996:150). But the reason for this is simply that much of Delany's recent writing "is explicitly not fiction" (1996:150), with him instead producing writings "that are documents of their times" (1996:150). The basis of these writings are depictions of sexualities that hint at "a transformation in terms of the possibilities of sex" (1996:151).⁵

⁵ Nichols states that, in terms of Delany and sex, lots of images come to mind: "In *Dhalgren*, Kid and Denny and Lanya having sex in their loft bed; in *Stars in my Pocket like Grains of Sand*, Rat Korga and Marq Dyeth (each the other's perfect erotic object) visiting the 'runs' on Velm; in *The Motion of Light in Water*, Delany as a young man visiting St Marks Baths for the first time, seeing an 'undulating mass of naked, male bodies, spread wall to wall'; in *The Tale of Dragons and Dreamers*, the lovers Gorgik and Small Sarg, one of whom must wear the iron slave collar, 'a symbolic distinction between slave and master ... necessary to desire's consummation'; in *The Tale of Rumour and Desire*, Clodon's foot and hand fetish; in *The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals*, Delany's matter-of-fact statement that between

In Delany's work sexuality is always plural, but alternatives are not inscribed as perverse or concealed. On the contrary, what is striking to me about the various sexualities in Delany's work is their ordinariness. That attitude, that demystification of sex, is what I find so appealing. (Nichols 1996:151)

Autobiography seems the perfect format for Delany to practise his role as a commentator of his times, by using discourse about his own life as a canvas to paint broader themes about changing social mores. Robert Smith notes that autobiography is a contested genre, just like SF and sword-and-sorcery, and thus it continues the theme of Delany working in the margin of literature to articulate marginal concerns – in other words, occupying “that margin as a site on intervention” (1995:61). Another reason why the autobiographical format surely proved so attractive to Delany is the opportunity it offers to dismantle the autobiographical subject in linguistic terms.

To represent itself in order to constitute itself, the autobiographical subject needs a means of representation, a language in short. And soon as language becomes an issue for autobiographical theory, any last footing ‘the autobiographical subject’ may have had gives way. (Smith 1995:58)

This means that, although the very nature of autobiography seems to privilege the centred subject, it raises larger questions about representation and language function that paradoxically decentre the subject. Thus Delany's strategy in *The Motion of Light and Water* is to reveal as much as he obscures, “for the bone of contention is the subject or self and whether it is whole, or fragmented; self-determining, or wrought with political and conceptual barbs” (1995:57). As Leigh Gilmore stresses, the issue is how the self is constructed in autobiography “by questioning the methodologies that produce and reproduce its cultural identity” (1994:5). Sidonie Smith warns, however, that the material body itself cannot be ignored when discussing matters of the self as subject. Thus Delany's pursuit of matters of the flesh can also be seen to centre the autobiographical subject in its true locus: the body itself. Smith speculates:

We may even speculate that subjectivity is the elaborate residue of the border politics of the body since bodies locate us topographically, temporally, socioculturally as well as linguistically in a series of transcodings along multiple axes of meaning. (1994:3)

1977 and 1983 he averaged 300 sexual contacts a year, mostly at particular movie houses, public bathrooms, and other places men would meet for anonymous sex” (1996:151).

In his autobiography, Delany writes how he had been informed of a particular cruising spot, which he visited, only to find that it bore no resemblance to its description.

I went once to the docks, stood across the street, under the street lamp, watching the trucks almost twenty minutes – and saw nothing of the mass orgies Simon had described. Now and then, a lone man in jeans wandered across to disappear among the parked vehicles – some driver checking his van?

But that was all.

“No,” Simon told me the next afternoon, “you have to cross over and walk around between them. And you still probably won’t see much.”

“Isn’t that kind of scary?” I asked.

“You got it,” Simon said.

A few nights later, I went back. And crossed over. (1990:192)

James Sallis notes that “borders, of course, are both boundary and frontier” (1996:94). Delany’s simple act of crossing the street to the side of the trucks is a symbol of his career and life – of confronting boundaries and crossing them. But, as Sallis points out, the act of transgression is only one side of the coin, with transformation being the other. Just as a boundary imposes limitations, so does it define possibilities. In his autobiography Delany deals with the issue of boundaries in terms of his relationship with Marilyn Hacker – of what they could do and could not do, as well as their mutual transgression. He recounts how, when he and Marilyn were involved with a character simply named Bob, he went cruising for sex, impelled by curiosity at what the experience would be like beyond the boundary of their three-way relationship.

The man that Delany eventually picks up reveals that he himself has been involved in a three-way relationship. Delany states that this random and unexpected doubling of his own experience had the effect of altering it into a “socially shared” one, albeit only between two people. He does not tell the man about his own involvement in a similar set-up as he feels that, even though they have been sexually intimate, there is a boundary between them due to his inability to communicate his own feelings. Delany locates this inability in the functioning of language itself, as a problem of articulation and definition.

At the same time this doubling had placed between this man and me a boundary, a silence, which, while saliva, semen, and perspiration had crossed it back and forth, I’d been barely able to penetrate with a sympathetic cliché and my name.

Already I’d decided there was little point in telling Bob and Marilyn about him. It wasn’t something current; it was something that had been and was over. (Perhaps a week later I changed my mind; their response was merely

interest). Now the boundary seemed primarily to halt a certain order of language.

At the same time I was the boundary, the place where language stalled.
(1990:408-9)

However, Delany notes that the articulation of boundaries is the first step in transforming them into frontiers. He uses the incident of the anonymous man randomly doubling his own life as a metaphor for the relationship between a writer and his audience, where the former transmutes his own experience into a “socially shared” reality for the latter. Thus the act of writing itself transgresses or displaces the boundary between the writer and his audience, creating an intimate space in a flux of discourse where the two can, however briefly, converge.

Those silences, those boundaries, were the gaps between the columns.

Yet even to conceive of them, to articulate them, to tell the story of their creation, constitution, or persistence, even to yourself – wasn’t that to begin to displace them? To speak, to write – wasn’t that to break the boundary of the self and let your hearer, your reader become the boundary instead of you ... but a boundary so much easier to cross now because she or he has been written to, spoken to? (1990:409-10)

David Samuelson notes that the marginality of SF as a literary genre becomes for Delany a crucial link with the “marginality of the deprived” (1994:34). “In a marginal genre, ruled by commercial concerns, Delany himself occupies a marginal position, as a gay black man driven by feminist, linguistic, and Marxist concerns” (1994:34). Delany, who is sufficiently light-skinned to be labelled as white, articulates a similar idea in his autobiography:

So, I thought, you are neither black nor white.

You are neither male nor female.

And you are that most ambiguous of citizens, the writer.

There was something at once very satisfying and very sad, placing myself at this pivotal suspension. It seemed, in the park at dawn, a kind of revelation – a kind of centre, formed of a play of ambiguities, from which I might move in any direction. (1990:92)

From a literary and social point of view it might seem relatively simple to impute a direction to the path that Delany has pursued in his professional and private life by commenting on his ‘struggle’ about ‘coming to terms’ with being black, gay, a writer, and an academic – and having being a child prodigy, to boot (Lunde 1996:116). ‘Struggle’ is an ideologically fashionable term that lumps all the marginal aspects of Delany’s character under the conveniently unitary banner of contestation. The danger of this is that it oversimplifies the discourse, and seeks to impose

analytical conformity on what is fruitful anarchy.⁶ Delany is not admitting indecisiveness or prevarication by stating that his marginality meant he could “move in any direction”. This should rather be seen as a prescient acknowledgement of the potentiality offered by that marginality, which is not a liability or a burden, as Lunde seems to imply.

Samuelson notes that Delany’s engagement with the marginal is not confined to the safe margin of his writing, but that he has often lived in dilapidated urban neighbourhoods in order to view society from its underbelly. However, this explanation “seems an after-the-fact rationalisation, too cerebral to be real, which begs more than it explains” (Samuelson 1994:35). It is apparent from Delany’s autobiography that he “seems to crave a degree of danger in his life” (Samuelson 1994:35).

The friends, acquaintances, and passersby that drift through the pages of his autobiography include petty criminals, underappreciated artists, historical personages such as Albert Einstein and WH Auden, and an oddball assortment of deviants and perverts, with Delany himself sensitised to such marginal categories by having undergone voluntary psychotherapy in 1964 to in order to cope with what amounted to, but is never stated as, a nervous breakdown. This leads Samuelson to conclude that Delany has always “criticised establishment rules and attitudes more by practice than by preaching”, as “acts of transgression, if not outright criminality”, are the inevitable outcome of crossing or transcending boundaries (1994:35):

Delany transgresses social and literary codes in several related ways. A writer on the racial and sexual margins of a predominantly white, heterosexual society, he provides a role model for readers otherwise disenfranchised. His art provides examples of individuals and whole societies celebrating cultural (including ‘racial’ and sexual) diversity. As both fiction-writer and critic, he has helped to expand literary boundaries to embrace the paraliterary, as well as to transform the boundaries of SF itself. (Samuelson 1994:36)

The portrait of Delany that I have painted so far seems inclusive and resonant, encompassed by the boundary of its own representation. But to attempt to understand Delany’s critical project, it is vital to cross a boundary, and ask a question that no one – least of all the writer himself – might be able to answer: who is Samuel R Delany? An answer implies the hierarchical imposition of an ultimate meaning. It is the uniqueness of a name combined with our society’s belief in a determinate, circumscribed identity which implies that such a question can indeed be answered. It

⁶ Lunde goes even further: “Delany attempts to come to terms with these facts about himself by working them out, directly and indirectly, in his art. And that art provides templates upon which we can assess our own efforts toward self-knowledge and self-acceptance” (1996:124).

cannot by definition be answered because this would stop the play of signification dead in its tracks, and conflate the border and frontier encompassed by a boundary into an unyielding brick wall. In his life and his work, Delany has always resisted closure, and the more he seems to reveal of himself, of who he actually is, the further and faster he spins away from the reader's grasp, in a motion as fleeting and dazzling as that of light in water.

It is revealing to compare the markedly different author photographs used throughout Delany's career. Taken together, they suggest that his literary persona is not a unitary construct, but is composed of many different facets. The photographs also reveal that Delany does influence readers' perceptions of himself by manipulating his own image. The photograph used in *Twentieth-Century American Science-Fiction Writers* (1981) shows a bearded Delany dressed respectably in a jacket and tie, smiling confidently at the camera – and, by implication, directly at the viewer. It is a strikingly handsome photograph, and conveys some of the energy and magnetism of a gifted young writer with a blossoming career. The cover photograph used in the Paladin edition of Delany's autobiography, taken by Bernard Kay in 1961, is of a Bohemian young writer, shirtless and strumming a guitar, staring seductively at the camera. Gone are the jacket, tie and beard. This is a provocative image of the writer as sex object, just as the text is an object of consumption for the reader.

In total contrast, the photograph used in *The Review of Contemporary Fiction* presents an older Delany wearing glasses and smiling impishly at the camera, and sporting a full beard that makes him look like a Biblical figure. He is wearing what looks like a casual denim shirt, with one sleeve rolled up to reveal an intricate tattoo. The first photograph seems more like the conventional image of a professor of comparative literature at UMass, while here Delany looks like one of the truck drivers or dock workers that feature in his autobiography. Another recent photograph, used on the back cover flap of *Hogg* (1994), shows Delany – with a radically trimmed beard – striking what can be only be described as a somewhat camp pose, throwing a hand up towards a backdrop of stars. The earnest young man, the bohemian, the brooding edifice, the poseur – these are all equally valid images of Delany, and reveal the complex refraction of his literary persona.⁷

⁷ Peplow and Bravard provide the following fascinating description of the young Delany's life: "It is easy to regard Delany as a sort of Artist as a Young Man during the 1960s. Something of a flower child, Delany lived a gypsy life, moving restlessly from apartment to apartment, city to city, country to country. He was very much of 'the bohemia of New York', to borrow a phrase from Thomas Disch, mixing easily with the art, music, theatre, and literature crowds in Greenwich Village and elsewhere. He even looked the part: colourful clothes, full beard, a single earring worn constantly from 1967 through 1975" (1980:19).

Aged 57 (in 2000), Delany published his first novel, namely *The Jewels of Apor*, in 1962, aged 20. His latest published works include *Shorter Views: Queer Thoughts and the Politics of the Paraliterary* (1999), and the graphic novel *Bread and Wine: An Erotic Tale of New York City* (1999), illustrated by Mia Wolff. This portrays his relationship with Dennis Rickett, who sold books from a blanket on West 72nd Street for many years before they met (Goldberg 1999, Seligman 1999).⁸ In a review of the book, Craig Seligman comments that what held him “truly spellbound, and a little horrified, was the outlandish exhibitionism of it all” (1999). Noting the social realism of the text, he adds that

Delany probably couldn't rise to this level of conviction if he weren't such an exhibitionist. Of course, most writers are, on some level – writing is performance, after all – just as readers are, by definition, voyeurs. But he's more flamboyant than most of us, both on the page and off. With his regal bearing, his portly stature, his dapper cane and his colossal white beard, he must have cut quite a figure in the porn palaces [of Times Square]. Despite his (uncharacteristic and unconvincing) assertion that ‘a certain reticence is appropriate when discussing it’, he doesn't shy away from letting us know that ‘on a scale of small, medium, and large I fall directly on the border line between the latter two.’ That's nice. (Seligman 1999)

Seligman's point is that this conveys more information than he needed – that is, the novel transgresses the boundary between the reader's expectations of the author, and the author's expectations of his readers. In this case, Seligman feels that it goes beyond the normal bounds of explicitness into the more shadowy realm of the private and the personal. But then he begins to question the reasons for this, and acknowledges that Delany “had the power to make me step back and examine my own discomfort” (1999):

What bothers me about it? Obviously not the explicitness, which I like in pornography. The level of personal exposure? Maybe – but I seem to feel a lot more embarrassed for Delany and Dennis than they do for themselves. Why should I care? Partly, I imagine, because I had to face some of the same issues Delany had to in writing ... How much do I want to reveal about myself to a bunch of anonymous readers? (Seligman 1999)

Times Square Red, Times Square Blue (1999) continues this theme of Delany's incessant self-exploration, and weaves together personal reminiscences and theoretical speculation to provide a social history of late twentieth-century Times

⁸ Dennis is not mentioned by surname in *Bread and Wine*, though he was mentioned in a feature story on Delany in *The New York Times* in 1996 by Carey Goldberg. Interestingly, in *Hogg* Delany notes his gratitude “to Dennis Rickett for his contribution of the cover illustration and ornaments” (1994).

Square in New York, focusing on the area's porn-theatre and sex-club district, which has since been 'gentrified'.⁹ Seligman says that though "Delany has worked in many genres, most notably science fiction, he's also an ebullient memoirist and an erudite essayist" (1999). The *Publisher's Weekly* review of this book notes that "acclaimed SF writer Delany ... proves himself a dazzlingly eloquent and original social commentator".

Indeed, with the only sign of Delany's continued activity in SF being an extract from the unpublished *The Splendour and Misery of Bodies, Of Cities* appearing in a 1996 edition of *The Review of Contemporary Fiction*, one can be forgiven for thinking that the 'acclaimed SF writer' has become nothing more than an 'original social commentator'. But it is rash to draw conclusions about the direction Delany's present interests will take him in, or what he will produce next. James Sallis remarks that:

As one looks back on thirty-plus years of work, it becomes clear that all along Delany has searched for some ideal form, some mode of writing at once true and imagined, real and fictive, that might encompass it all, that might be able to contain the world's multifarious leanings, vectors, veerings, and prevarications. (1996:95)

Michael Hemmingson comments that Delany is "an enigma of literature" in that he is both a "serious writer and author of pornography" (1996:127). He argues that anyone encountering Delany's work "must question this duality" (1996:127). Hemmingson is referring in particular to *Hogg* (1994), and says that some will no doubt wonder why Delany has chosen to be associated with this work, or not opted instead for a pseudonym, or why even he has pursued publication at all of what, he implies, is such a thoroughly reprehensible book. Hemmingson argues that "Hogg may very well be the most vile, disgusting personality to emerge from contemporary American fiction" (1996:126), as the following description from the book proves:

"They call me Hogg 'cause a hog lives dirty. I don't wash none. And when I get hungry, I eat my own snot. I been wearin' these clothes since winter. I don't even take my dick out my pants to piss most times, unless it's in some cunt's face. Or all over a cocksucker like you. What I usually do is park the truck in the sun with the light comin' in the window and piss my pants up something terrible ... Yeah, boy; all that nice, hot stuff, running down my leg, and squirming my ass around in it ... I got worms, boy – had 'em ever since I was a kid. But I won't get rid of 'em 'cause I like the way they make my asshole itch ... I gotta drink a lot of beer and eat a lot of pizza pies and

⁹ Exactly how personal is indicated by the fact that some of the "truly unsavoury" characters Delany bumped into include a "stud-turned-crackhead" called "Joey-Who-Needs-a-Bath", and "the sadly demented Mad Masturbator" (Seligman 1999).

French-fried potatoes to keep a gut like this and all of them little fuckers fed. I got a hairy ass and it sure cakes up crusty. But I just don't believe in wipin' when I got a freaky little son of a bitch like you to eat it out for me." (Delany 1994c:24-5)

This description of Hogg is so baroque prurient that it is almost laughable, a point that Hemmingson misses. Granted, the subject matter is distasteful: the narrator first encounters Hogg raping and beating a woman in an alley, and then engages in fellatio and sodomy with Hogg, who is a 'rape artist' and general terroriser for hire (1996:126). At first it is unclear if the narrator is spectator or victim, but he eventually succumbs to the moral destitution represented by Hogg, and helps to brutalise a woman and her crippled daughter. The novel's depiction of depravity is so studied and beyond the pale of everyday experience that a reader's reaction is as much fascination as it is repulsion, which is perhaps Delany's main point: that the marginal is attractive precisely because of its potential danger. But, as Hemmingson notes shrewdly, much of this fascination is centred around the author himself: it seems incongruous that a respected SF trailblazer, critic, and academic like Delany would give life to a thoroughly detestable protagonist who in the course of the novel runs the entire gamut of depravity, humiliation, brutality, and degradation known to society (1996:127).

Hogg transgresses the boundary that critics and readers alike have placed around Delany, confounding the notion that he can be comfortably defined or quantified. Delany himself comments on the novel, arguing that the attraction of the pornographic novel is that it gives a writer an ideal opportunity to structure some of his or her inchoate fantasies (1989:12). Just as Delany used the SF template to turn the genre on its head in such provocative novels as *Dhalgren*, so does *Hogg* cross pornography's own boundaries. Delany comments that the social template forming the basis of *Hogg* is the fact that "power in our society is overwhelmingly allotted to men", and that "women are almost always society's victims" (1989:13). However, in the light of the comment that the pornographic novel is an opportunity to explore "inchoate fantasies", it is unclear if this is just an after-the-fact rationalisation of the novel's inherent misogyny.¹⁰

¹⁰ In a general discussion on misogyny and pornography, Delany comments that "Sade goes to great pains to show that the idea that women are the upholders of the values of society and civilisation is an illusion fostered on them partly to get the better of them – so they may be raped, enslaved, and all money and economic power they may be fortunate enough to have inherited or actually to have earned in their own work can be stripped from them the more easily" (1989:4). Delany is clearly aware of the misogynistic elements of pornography, and exploits these to highlight gender inequality. But one could also argue that the misogyny of his pornographic fiction is a reflection of his own internalised misogyny, particularly when bearing in mind that gay men in general are notoriously unsympathetic to women (and vice versa?)

What is also troubling is that the social template of *Hogg* is presented as an *a priori* reality, with no alternative offered, and thus it can be argued that the novel underpins or reinforces the status quo. Despite the delayed publication, it is important to realise that *Hogg* is an early Delany novel, and is perhaps as inchoate as its writer's own fantasies. A much more successful treatise on a similar subject, and definitely a much more revolutionary statement, is *The Mad Man* (1994), discussed in the previous chapter in the context of the heterotopian novel *Triton*, which seamlessly conflates Delany's autobiographical and critical concerns in the context of a murder mystery.

The Mad Man is arguably the most plot-driven of Delany's novels to date, or the most readerly, but it is also arguably his most sustained fictional statement on marginality in terms of sexual orientation and lifestyle. Ray Davis remarks that, written 20 years after Delany's first two porn novels, *The Mad Man* is Delany's "most thoroughgoing push towards a 'new age of moral chaos'" (2000). In his autobiography, Delany comments on his motivation for writing about a time even before the sexual revolution of the 1960s, let alone the spectre of HIV/AIDS, which hangs over *The Mad Man* like a pall. Delany refutes the argument that, through his autobiography, he is indulging in "nostalgia for a medically unfeasible libertinism" (1990:268), arguing instead that the marginal is gradually being co-opted into the mainstream, and therefore allowing for a greater play of freedom, particularly with regard to sexuality.

... it is my firm suspicion, my conviction, and my hope that once the Aids crisis is brought under control, the West will see a sexual revolution to make a laughing stock of any social movement that till now has borne the name. That revolution will come precisely because of the infiltration of clear and articulate language into the marginal areas of human sexual exploration Now that a significant range of people have begun to get a clearer idea of what has been possible among the varieties of human pleasure in the recent past, heterosexuals and homosexuals, females and males will insist on exploring them even further. (Delany 1990:268)

What is significant about this statement is its all-inclusiveness, as Delany is at pains to include men and women, homosexuality and heterosexuality. The 'libertinism' he is predicting is that humanity in general rediscover its sexual nature, and indulge in the pleasures of the flesh in a non-prejudicial and totally accepting manner. He is arguing that the boundary defining sexuality in contemporary society should be transgressed in the name of transgression itself and, to this revolutionary end, *The Mad Man* is a clarion call. John Marr, in essence, is Everyman, whose debasement is transformed ultimately into a journey of socio-sexual enlightenment.

He is a black graduate student working on a thesis on the life and work of philosopher Timothy Hasler, killed a decade earlier in mysterious circumstances. The novel begins with Marr's declaration that he is glad to be alive in a time of plague:

I do not have Aids. I am surprised that I don't. I have had sex with men weekly, sometimes daily – without condoms – since my teens, though true, it's been overwhelmingly ... no, more accurately it's been – since 1980 – all oral, not anal. My adventures with homosexuality started in the early-middle seventies, in the men's room of the terminal on the island of the Staten Island Ferry (Delany 1994b:7)

Marr informs the reader that the story he is about to relate is not that 'unusual', though it does contain elements of "depravity, murder, mystery, love" (1994b:9). The starting point he chooses for his tale is looking at a photographic frame in Professor Mossman's office containing separate pictures of Hasler, Marr, and the professor. Only Mossman is white – the first two are Korean-American and Afro-American respectively. All three are marginal: philosopher, student, and obscure academic.¹¹

The photographic frame represents the three figures as separate people, but through the course of the tale the boundaries separating them will be crossed. We also learn that Hasler had formed a "fabled friendship" with poet Almira Adler, and that his output included six SF stories, the last called 'The Black Comet', which "turned on some of the finer mathematics that informed his articles on the philosophy of natural languages" (1994b:12). At this early point anyone who has read Delany's autobiography about his early years will be wondering if the author is not perhaps turning his own life into fiction: Delany has stated that, for some time now, his sexual proclivity has been oral in the face of Aids; he had met the fabled poet WH Auden; and Comet Jo was a character from *Empire Star*. Admittedly these are small details, but their resonances with Delany's life are clear. However, he begins the novel with the forceful disclaimer referred to earlier, namely that *The Mad Man* is an imaginative work of fiction. This tells the reader that although the story seems to bear some relation to Delany's own life, such correlations are neither obvious nor intended.¹²

In his autobiography, Delany recounts receiving fan mail from a person convinced that 'Samuel R. Delany' was a pseudonym for AE van Vogt:

¹¹ The 'marginal' is itself a very slippery signified, for current US society in particular is characterised by so many forms of marginality, or exclusion or difference, that the 'non-marginal' is almost a meaningless term.

¹² There does seem to be something disingenuous about this denial though. After all, this is a professor of literature writing about a fictional professor of literature and one of his students.

If you took the first and last letters from Samuel and followed them by the fourth and fifth letters in Delany, it spelled *Slan*, the title of Van Vogt's most famous SF novel. And, besides, the writer went on, he'd never heard of an SF writer named 'Samuel R. Delany' before and he knew all the SF writers there were. (1990:280)

Just as there are dangers in overworking a text, so must there be a point where attaching autobiographical significance to fictional details can lead a reader totally astray, which is perhaps the message of the disclaimer. However, one must remember that *Hogg* and *The Mad Man* saw publication at roughly the same time and, as Hemmingson notes, part of the fascination generated by these eclectic novels was directed at the author who produced them (1996:127). What sort of a man was he? Was he as weird, or perhaps even weirder, than his characters? Had he engaged in any of the activities he had described? One can imagine Delany's frustration at such speculation – when all the critical attention should be focused on his texts, he found that he himself was under the microscope. But surely Delany himself has opened this door by turning his own life into the stuff of his fiction.

His strategy in *The Mad Man* is to include details or write about events just similar enough to his own life experiences to suggest verisimilitude, and then to state in a disclaimer that any connection was 'preposterous'. This could goad a nosy reader into inferring even more autobiographical detail, for the disclaimer is patently false, but the boundary between truth and fiction is so blurred by now that Delany's identity merges with his own text. His strategy of 'revelation through obfuscation' is actually a form of camouflage that places a veil between the text and its creator, through which only shadows can be glimpsed. But this also promotes the author as an object of mystery, and furthers the mystique surrounding him. This begs the question: what is an author? Barthes writes that the notion of the author is a 'tyrannical centre' meant to anchor the meaning of a particular text, or to act as a depository to contain and define such meaning.

The image of literature to be found in ordinary culture is tyrannically centred on the author, his person, his life, his tastes, his passions The explanation of a work is always sought in the man or woman who produced it, as if it were always in the end, through the more or less transparent allegory of the fiction, the voice of a single person, the author 'confiding' in us. (Barthes 1977b:143)

However, Barthes notes that it is language which speaks and performs, and not the author who, by the very nature of writing, must partake of a "prerequisite impersonality" (1977b:143) in order to reach this paradoxical point of origination, described as a "neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away"

(1977b:142). The subject, of course, is the author, whose identity is filtered through and subsumed by writing.

As soon as a fact is narrated no longer with a view to it acting directly on reality but intransitively, that is to say, finally outside of any function other than that of the very practice of the symbol itself, this disassociation occurs, the voice loses its origin, the author enters into his own death, writing begins. (1977b:142)

As Susan Sontag notes, Barthes's point is that language is everything: "all of reality is presented in the form of language – the poet's wisdom, and also the structuralist's" (1982:xx).¹³ A speaker does not impart meaning to his or her utterances, but such meaning is produced by the linguistic system itself. The implication for literature is that both the author and 'reality' are jettisoned as departure points for interpretation. This results in the notion of an "open-ended, polysemous literature" (Sontag 1982:xi), with the implication for criticism being that the critic is also a creator of literature, or an inventor of meaning. Barthes comments further:

Once the Author is removed, the claim to decipher a text becomes quite futile. To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on the text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing. Such a conception suits criticism very well, the latter allotting itself the important task of discovering the Author (or its hypostases: society, history, psyche, liberty) beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is 'explained' ... (1977b:147)

Perhaps this is why Delany balks at outright autobiographical attribution in *The Mad Man*, for he wishes to prevent the closure of meaning and instead open up his text to the possibilities of interpretation. In Barthes's terms, Delany is an *écrivain*, an author working "intransitively insofar as he devotes his attention to the means – which is language – instead of the end, or the meaning" (Sturrock 1979:65). The *écrivain*, on the other hand, intends his or her text to have only one meaning – the meaning he or she wishes to convey to the reader. Barthes concedes that writers are varying mixtures of these qualities, "sometimes conveying a predetermined meaning and sometimes playing with language to see what emerges" (Sturrock 1979:66). He regards the *écrivain* as the writer of the future, who works towards meaning rather than from a singular, essentialist meaning.

This has profound implications for the relationship between the reader and the writer as well, for it is conventionally taken that a writer knows what he or she wants

¹³ This emphasis on the primacy of language seems to negate social realities and bodily experiences, and is an important criticism of poststructuralism in terms of its perceived anti-humanism.

to say, and then works toward the goal of communicating this. But the opposite approach – “that an author had first decided how to say and only then discovered what ‘it’ was” (Sturrock 1979:67) – upsets this one-way relationship between writer and reader, instead supplanting it with a two-way flow whereby the reader is as much a participant in a text’s meaning as the writer. The *écrivain* is

the paradoxical hero of structuralism: the creature of the system, in this instance language. No longer is the author to be seen as a Subject full of conscious but as yet private meanings who will take advantage of language to make them public. (Sturrock 1979:67)

What this means is that the boundary between author and reader is dismantled to its simplest interface: the text itself. The author is not linked to any external political or social reality, but is simply defined as “the watcher who stands at the crossroads of all other discourses”, as opposed to being a “purveyor of doctrine” (1982:xxi).¹⁴ Thus literature becomes “a gratuitous, free activity” (1982:xxii); it is unbounded. The instrument of subversion proposed by Barthes is the act or process of writing itself. Sontag explains that

For Barthes, it is not the commitment that writing makes to something outside of itself (to a social or moral goal) that makes literature an instrument of opposition and subversion but a certain practice of writing itself: excessive, playful, intricate, subtle, sensuous ... (1982:xxi–xxii)

Delany employs such a playful and sensuous writing style in *The Mad Man*, where he tantalises the reader with pseudo-autobiographical elements. His writing incorporates the poetic (the ‘proem’ at the beginning) to the epistolary (John Marr’s long letter to Sam), as well as diary entries and even an article from the medical journal *The Lancet* appended onto the novel. The notion of ‘writing at play’ leads Barthes to distinguish between *lisible* or readerly and *scriptible* or writerly texts. The former are consumed passively, while in the latter the reader participates actively in the production of the text.

However, *lisible* and *scriptible* is a scale of value, as no text is purely one or the other (Jefferson 1986:108). The emphasis is on open-endedness, with the *scriptible* being a process whereby the generation of meaning “is seen as an essential part of the activity of the text, and is not subordinated to an ultimate signified”

¹⁴ Sturrock’s definition does seem to imply political intent: “The *écrivain* is withdrawn but he is no dreamer; rather, he is a toiling language-worker whose isolation lasts only for as long as he is actually writing and for who, far from washing his hands of the world, is its conscience ...” (1979:66).

(1986:108). The *scriptible* gives the reader access to “the magic of the signifier, to the pleasure of writing” (1986:108). This pleasure is induced in a *scriptible* text by the act of writing, which highlights the nature of a text as an artificial linguistic creation, and simultaneously celebrates this arbitrariness:

The Text is a sort of verbal carnival, in which language is manifestly out on parole from its humdrum daily tasks. The writer’s language-work results in a linguistic spectacle, and the reader is required to enjoy that spectacle for its own sake rather than to look through language to the world. (Sturrock 1979:69)

Barthes postulates an erotic relationship between writer, text and reader, with the ‘body’ of the writer speaking and being offered to the ‘body’ of the reader in a shared intimacy. *The Mad Man* and *The Motion of Light in Water* deal with bodily appetite, consumption and satiation. This metaphor can be extended to the writing process itself as an act of desire consummated by the reader. Although a text does not have a single unified meaning, plurality of meaning must still have a point of convergence – and that point is the reader. The pleasure of the text is derived from the ineffable interface between the two, creating what Barthes terms a seam, fault, or flaw. The boundaries of the interface are, firstly, “an obedient, conformist, plagiarising edge” (Barthes 1975:6) and, secondly, a mobile or blank edge “which is never anything but the site of its effect” (1975:6). Barthes’s explication of an erotics of reading highlights the dynamic and complex interrelation between writer and reader.¹⁵ An important corollary of the pleasure of the text, which highlights writing as an organic process and the impact or effect of this process, is that “as institution, the author is dead” (1975:27):

... his civil status, his biographical person have disappeared; dispossessed, they no longer exercise over his work the formidable paternity whose account literary history, teaching, and public opinion had the responsibility of establishing and renewing. (Barthes 1975:27)

Writer and reader need each other, and express this mutual desire through the medium of the text. The figure of the author is neither representation nor projection, but the result of a particular textual function:

¹⁵ The idea of an erotics of reading is propounded in *The Pleasure of the Text*, where Barthes distinguishes between *plaisir* or pleasure, associated with *lisible* writing, and *jouissance* or enjoyment, associated with the *scriptible* (1975:vi). *Jouissance* derives from “the semantic anarchy which is inseparable from the authentic Text and by the flaunting of the author’s neuroses (his ‘body’)” (Sturrock 1979:72).

The text is a fetish object, and this fetish desires me. The text chooses me, by a whole disposition of invisible screens, selective baffles: vocabulary, references, readability, etc.; and, lost in the midst of a text (not behind it, like a *deus ex machina*) there is always the other, the author. (Barthes 1975:27)

Just as Barthes dispels the notion of an author's essential integrity or unity, so does he apply his "philosophy of disintegration" (Sturrock 1979:53) to himself in *Roland Barthes by Roland Barthes* (1975). Here Barthes's main aim is to avoid definition of himself – whether as a person in terms of his life, or as a thinker and writer in terms of his output – for definition implies closure and finality.

What he is fighting against is the idea that he must become an object of attention, for objects are as good as dead – they are known, fixed quantities, without either mystery or the potential for radical change. (Sturrock 1979:52)

The idea of biography itself is countered by Barthes's notion of the death of the author – that is, the author's dissolution into a textual function, and his diffuse relationship with the reader through the pleasure of the text. What Barthes attempts in his autobiography is anti-biography – to designify himself, as being named is to die the inevitable textual death of the author. Sontag points out that what Barthes is aiming for is the "dismantling of his own authority" (1982:xxx). That is, he wishes to remove himself from the critical pedestal he has placed himself on by virtue of his own writing. His anti-biography is an attempt to reclaim his freedom as a writer, who ultimately "is the deputy of his own ego – of that self in perpetual flight before what is fixed by writing, as the mind is in perpetual flight from doctrine" (1982:xxxii).

It is in this context that I wish to examine Delany's own attempt at Barthesian anti-biography, an intention indicated by its central running metaphor: that of light in water. Delany writes about an aunt and uncle who had gone to see the Jewel Box Review, a group of drag artists, and how he overheard that the master of ceremonies was a counsellor he had met at summer camp. For Delany it is a revelatory moment in which seemingly disparate portions of his own life experience suddenly showed themselves to be part of an intricate web of coincidence and interaction, as well as revealing that the boundaries separating the compartmentalised sections of his life were as illusory as the shimmer of light in water:

And for a moment (and only a moment), it was as if a gap between two absolute and unquestionably separated columns or encampments of the world had suddenly revealed itself as illusory, that what I had assumed two was really one; and that the glacial solidity of the boundary I'd been sure existed between them was as permeable as shimmering water, as shifting light. (Delany 1990:85)

The book's jacket photograph has been overlaid with a colour spectrum as a symbol of this shimmer. We see the picture of Delany through this shimmer in the same way that his character or persona is refracted through the text. The metaphor of light in water is meant to suggest the fluidity and openness that Barthes himself celebrated in his pursuit of the secrets of language. It is tempting to ask the question: why write an autobiography? And why conclude the attempt at such an arbitrary point if the intention is to reveal the nature or character of the writer himself?¹⁶ The focus is exclusively on the young Delany, the SF prodigy. There is little trace of the mature writer of *The Mad Man* or *Bread and Wine*. It is important to note that Delany's autobiography concerns a pre-Aids era. In a modern age where casual unprotected sex can precipitate a death sentence and where, as a result, a certain puritanism has stiffened the public debate about matters of the flesh, the sensual cornucopia represented by Delany's autobiography seems a revolutionary act.

Delany comments that his autobiography is his "vague and illformed attempt" to write his "own, brief, limited, and inadequate chronicle, story, emplotment of that rippling and evanescent tapestry" that is individual perception (1990:148). The brief 12-page first section, 'Sentences: An Introduction', relates Delany's memories of the death of his father, whom he thought died of lung cancer in 1958 when he was 17. However, when Peplow and Bravard contact Delany about collaborating on a biographical essay to preface their bibliography of his then 16-year output, it transpires that Delany had actually been 18 when his father had died in 1960 (1990:xiv).

He explains that while truth or factual accuracy is crucial to historical and personal credibility – especially in terms of autobiography – an account containing only the initial statement would be incorrect. But one that omitted it, or failed to allude at its relationship with the second, would be incomplete. Even something as seemingly concrete as biographical detail is subject to the shimmer of light in water, as it partakes of the substance of memory, which is equally ephemeral, and of history, which has to be contested and negotiated in order to generate and sustain meaning.

Peplow and Bravard's biography is exactly what Delany's autobiography is not: an exacting chronological account of the writer's life and career. But just as the two contradictory sentences about Delany's recollection of his father's death are both needed in order to arrive at some understanding of the truth, so is Peplow and

¹⁶ Delany ends the autobiography at the point where, in his late twenties, he was about to depart for Europe (1990:529). One has a strong sense that his 'adventures' are only about to begin, which confounds the traditional sense of closure. Delany comments: "I've always thought I had an interesting life between the ages of thirteen and twenty-seven or thereabouts. After that, I hope, the work becomes interesting" (1994a:251).

Bravard's work an equally illuminating companion piece. In a sense, the two accounts function in the margins of each other, with one inscribed over the other to create a multilayered and intertextual palimpsest. However, neither one of the two is a privileged text, for this would suggest a hierarchy of preference that runs against Delany's values of free play and fluid discourse. Instead the boundary separating the two is as refracted as the motion of light in water. Delany comments that the seemingly intractable problem of autobiography – of where the boundary of truth lies – is actually a fertile ground for re-evaluation and consolidation.

Honesty? Accuracy? Tact? These are the problems of all biographers, auto- or otherwise. But the very broadness of the questions obscures the specific ways each can manifest itself. Few of us are ever biographised – especially during our lifetime. No one is born a biographical subject, save the odd and antiquated royal heir; I have never seen a book on how to be a good one. But, like anything else, having your life researched and written about is an experience, with particular moments that characterise it, and make it what it is. (Delany 1990:xiv)

As a public figure, Delany's life has been researched and written about by readers and critics eager to glean the slightest nugget of biographical motivation or intention from his texts. Delany obviously knew that his autobiography, which brought his own sexuality into the open for the delectation of a much wider audience than his SF output, for example, had received, would be the equivalent of throwing wood onto the fire. There is also a sense that a biography is a summation or a coda, a capstone ending the edifice accumulated gradually by a career, in the same way that limestone percolates from water (which shimmers with the refraction of the light it gives forth). But far from such lofty aims, the autobiography can be seen as merely another textual and authorial experiment. Alluding to his own motivations for penning it, Delany quotes from *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, Written By Himself* as a preface.¹⁷

If, then, the following narrative does not appear sufficiently interesting to engage general attention, let my motive be some excuse for its publication. I am not so foolishly vain as to expect from it either immortality or literary reputation. If it affords any satisfaction to my numerous friends, at whose request it has been written, or in the smallest degree promotes the interests of humanity, the ends for which it was undertaken will be fully attained, and every wish of my heart gratified. Let it therefore be remembered that, in wishing to avoid censure, I do not aspire to praise. (Delany 1990:vii)

¹⁷ This is a founding text of African American slave writing, and by quoting from it Delany is alluding to his own heritage.

There is something disingenuous about this particular quotation, as certainly no legitimate claim can be made that Delany's narrative is uninteresting – it won the Hugo Award for best non-fiction title of the year in 1990. As to the notion of its having been written for his friends at their behest, it seems an extraordinarily public means of conveying the intimate and no doubt sensitive details of one's life. As for the claim that it might promote the 'interests of humanity', the inclusion of graphic sexual detail and questionable morality raised an eyebrow among some reviewers: *The Library Journal*, for example, declared that "the book is less about fiction writing than it is about sex" (1999).¹⁸ On the other hand, it can also be seen as a self-affirming and courageous act. Biographies are usually associated with dead legends, and to take charge of his own early self-definition in such a controversial fashion is an indication of Delany's predilection of crossing all boundaries from taste to literary convention.

Recounting only the early part of his life, Delany is by no means suggesting that his career is over, for his autobiography is an opportunity of assessing the author anew – to go back to those early texts, and look for those formative traces scattered throughout *The Motion of Light in Water* that can perhaps even reveal pointers for the future. The fact that Delany quotes another autobiography in order to back up his own motivations is symbolic of the double boundary he is labouring under: the demarcation between himself and the reader, which is to be broached by the text itself, and the boundary between the author's 'real' person and his 'autobiographical' persona in the text.

Peplow and Bravard begin their biography with the following quotation taken from their correspondence with Delany: "The biographical – or perhaps autobiographical – problem is that I am tempted to write you a dozen autobiographies, each from a different point of view" (1980:1). Delany attempts to solve this dilemma in his autobiography by including all the information at his disposal, such as with the account of his memory of his father's death. The 'untrue' sentence, which he thought had been validated by memory, but had been disproved by logical deduction, forms a parallel column running side-by-side with the 'legitimised' text, "in a second column of type that doubles the one that makes up this book" (1990:31). The boundary separating the two columns forms the discursive space where they interact to produce the rich tapestry of the text. Included in this parallel column are what Delany terms the "basal and the quotidian" (1990:31), meaning those events, peculiarities, and disruptions that make up everyday life, but are not necessarily considered biographical material.

¹⁸ *Publisher's Weekly* was less reserved, and called it a "self-indulgent, portentously titled hodge-podge" of slender autobiographical snippets that only revealed sporadically how Delany's controversial science fiction emerged. The final verdict: "Fans of his SF will be disappointed" (1999).

Peplow and Bravard do not take this parallel column into account, as they adopt a strictly linear and academic approach to the problem of defining Delany as a biographical subject, and thereby aim to arrive at his essential nature as a person and a writer. In order to make the subject under study more amenable to close observation, Delany's early life is immediately divided into three distinct sections. This is a classic instance of the observer changing the condition of what is being observed. Peplow and Bravard's categories are arbitrary, and depend as much on their own experiences, prejudices, and influences as any discernible boundaries in Delany's life. Such categorisation also creates the erroneous impression that a writer's life is like a text, and can be separated into neat chapters and sections.

Interestingly, *The Motion of Light in Water* is basically a collection of numbered vignettes,¹⁹ but instead of producing an effect of compartmentalisation, the overall impression is diffusion and arbitrariness, representing Delany's life experiences and recollections as a slowly accreting and constantly vacillating process. Peplow and Bravard also do not indicate that the boundaries separating their categories are totally permeable, and that movement between them is essential to convey the complexity of their subject matter.²⁰ In their concluding summation, Peplow and Bravard state that an "important, controversial and worthy" point to consider is Delany's position as a black writer, with "women's rights and gay liberation" being two causes that "he has adopted and which affect his work" (1980:53):

Our correspondence with Delany, our reading of his novels, stories and essays, and our survey of the fans, critics and scholars have convinced us that Delany is in a unique position. He has already created memorable works of fiction, and he will continue to do so. He may even produce 'The Masterpiece' some of his fans expect. . . . Obviously no finished portrait of this complex man can emerge at this time. (Peplow and Bravard 1980:57)²¹

This is as true now as when it was written in 1980. One of the more important events in Delany's so-called 'middle period' is the birth of the pseudonym Leslie K Steiner, a name that Delany originally appended to a mock-critical essay he had

¹⁹ *Publisher's Weekly* noted that the "the book's paragraphs and sections are numbered, divided and subdivided like a dissertation", which produces a "detached" style (1999). One of the most notable difference between the 1988 and 1990 editions of Delany's autobiography is the numbering or indexing system used.

²⁰ Section one is '1942–1960: Boyhood and Schooling', section two is 'The 1960s: Emergence of the Wunderkind', and section three is 'The 1970s: Toward the Middle Period' (Peplow and Bravard 1980).

²¹ Peplow and Bravard quote from a 1959 letter written by Delany's English teacher: "You have the potentiality of becoming a writer by profession. You have originality, a gift of observation, and an ability to recreate the exact feeling of an experience, an excellent ear for speech and a daring approach to word use. With youth and energy on your side, you can achieve something that will leave its mark" (1980:17).

written entitled 'Some Remarks Towards a Reading of *Dhalgren*', and which received a mention in an article in *Science-Fiction Studies* by Peter Alterman (1980:48). Peplow and Bravard state further that the Steiner persona surfaced again in 'The Anti-Pornography of Samuel R. Delany', written as a companion piece to *The Tides of Lust* and *Hogg*, and in an appendix to *Tales of Nevèrÿon* in 1979, where it is revealed that "Steiner is in fact a woman of Afro-American and Jewish ancestry, and a mathematician and linguist of great repute" (1980:49).²²

At the time of the Alterman reference, Delany "recalled as many copies of the Steiner piece as possible" (1980:48), but his later elaboration of the Steiner persona – and his adoption of additional alter egos such as SL Kermit – mark the beginning of Delany's quest for Barthesian plurality and dissemination through the medium of his own work. Ironically, in a 1990 interview in the very journal that gave critical substance to Steiner, *Science-Fiction Studies*, Delany comments that he inhabits a world where Samuel R Delany as author is non-existent:

I've never really read anything he's written. I know a lot about him. I've even looked over his shoulder while he was working. But there's a veil lying between me and his actual texts – it lets me see the letters he puts down, but completely blocks the words. All I finally get to do is listen to him subvocalise about a text he hopes he's writing – and, when I try to reread it later, again I only hear his subvocal version of the text he wished he'd penned. (Philmus 1990:314)

What are the implications of this 'veil' that exists between Delany and his texts for his own autobiography? Was he able to cross the boundary dividing his 'real' self from his 'written' and 'read' selves, or did this just serve to compartmentalise his persona even further? Peplow and Bravard's limited biography is remarkable for what it excludes – that is, what it relegates to the parallel column of discourse. There is limited physical description of Delany, the world he inhabits, and nothing of the social minutiae and everyday routine that combine to create reality. A reader amasses such necessary detail to create the base in which the author as person or individual can be anchored. Without this base, the author becomes a free-floating enigma, dappling the text with the restless and inconclusive shimmer of light in water. Barthes questions precisely this interest in the 'daily life', and suggests that the very plethora

²² Delany comments on Steiner's origins: "She had begun merely as a voice, writing down wonderful things in the nebular dark where wishes are whispered aloud. I had stood (in that darkness) at her shoulder, transcribing what she'd muttered over to herself as she'd written it" (1989:xii–xiii). He adds: "Today Steiner seems a kind of joke, played, I realise, largely on myself. It is time to give her up ..." (1989:xiii).

of detail which is taken to be the detritus of reality is as much a fantasy as the authorial persona itself – and indeed perpetuates this illusion:

Why this curiosity about petty details: schedules, habits, meals, lodging, clothing, etc.? Is it the hallucinatory relish of ‘reality’ (the very materiality of ‘that once existed’)? And is it not the fantasy itself which invokes the ‘detail’, the tiny private scene, in which I can easily take my place? (Barthes 1975:53)

The structure of Delany’s autobiography seems to be designed in such a manner so as to subvert the very notion of structure. The only hint of the type of categorisation employed by Peplow and Bravard is in the subtitle, ‘East Village Sex and Science Fiction Writing: 1960–1965’. As I have mentioned, the book comprises a brief introduction called ‘Sentences: an Introduction,’ while the main section is entitled ‘The Peripheries of Love’, again indicating Delany’s interest in marginality. He begins the autobiography randomly and innocuously, when he and Hacker moved into the East Village. Delany questions why they had married, “this Jew from the Bronx, this black from Harlem”, adding that such an easy and stereotypical categorisation both conceals and reveals the truth (1990:15). Earlier on Delany had written that “a careful and accurate biographer can, here and there, know more about the biographical subject than the subject him– or herself” (1990:xxi).

But what the biographer cannot know or even acknowledge is the parallel column of the discourse, with its doubts, silences and spaces shadowing and sparring with the legitimised text. Delany argues that this attempt at autobiography is not the final word on this particular period of his life – and nor is it meant to be. If the author has died, as Barthes claimed – with such a death being part of the bliss of succumbing to the pleasure of the text – then surely the autobiography is a kind of rebirth of the author, and an acknowledgement of the plural and ephemeral nature of the authorial fiction.

I am not about to try here for the last word on event and evidential certainty. I hope it’s clear: despite the separate factual failing each is likely to fall into, the autobiographer (much less the memoirist) cannot replace the formal biographer. Nor am I even going to try. I hope instead to sketch, as honestly and effectively as I can, something I can recognise as my own, aware as I do so that even as I work after honesty and accuracy, memory will make this only one possible fiction among the myriad – many in open conflict – anyone might write of any of us, as convinced as any other that what he or she wrote was the truth. (Delany 1990:xxi)

Delany comments that the power of writing is its ability “to hold sway over memory, making it public, keeping it private, possibly, even, keeping it secret from oneself” (1990:39). Thus the apparent simplicity and factual clarity of the

autobiographical format is, in fact, an elaborate screen selectively concealing the truth. Delany comments further about the “trade-off between writing and desire” (1990:40). An author has the tendency “to keep the word at bay and restrain it from the paper” (1990:40), so that he or she retains and refines it in his or her mind, but this is countered by the fact that “all forces drove to realise the word on paper” (1990:40), resulting in a potent feedback loop where “imaginative specificity” is balanced by “experiential richness” (1990:41).

Writing is not simply a case of putting word to paper, as it is also the outcome of a complex dialogue or discourse that an author engages in with him- or herself. Nowhere is this notion of an authorial discourse more prevalent than in the autobiography, where the author engages dialectically with history and memory. An example of this discourse is Delany giving more than one version of events, as he searches for a margin “within and round what’s already written” (1990:51) in which to inscribe the totality of his experiences, for the written narrative sometimes places certain things “outside of language” (1990:51). This does not form a “consecutive report” (1990:51), and neither is it attached to the main narrative in a conventional format such as footnotes. Instead it is a “double narrative, in its parallel columns” (1990:54).

An important event in *The Motion of Light in Water* in the sense of what it reveals about Delany’s approach to the workmanlike aspect of writing – and one which is not even mentioned by Peplow and Bravard – is Delany’s acquisition of his first notebook, in which he began an intermittent journal that he has maintained ever since (1990:66). Indeed, his autobiography is structured like a random pastiche of oddly-numbered journal entries, symbolising the fragmentary nature of memory and experience itself. That first notebook became an indispensable part of Delany’s school baggage, containing impressions, journal entries or random jottings and homework in the front, and masturbation fantasies in the back:

The entries ... would move closer and closer together, like complex graphic parentheses, eating from both sides the diminishing central sheath ... till, sometimes, they interpenetrated.

Then, writing itself would seem to be – whether devoted to reality or fantasy, material life or lust, whether at the beginning or at the end of a notebook – marginal to a vast, empty, unarticulated centre called the real world that was displaced more and more by it, reducing that centre to a margin in its turn, a mere and tenuous split between two interminable columns of writing ... (1990:67)

If an autobiography reveals the complex interrelationship between an author, his personal life, and his read or written life, then a journal is further evidence of the

Barthesian notion that an author is not a discrete entity, but a collection of elements or a process in which the author's being is articulated. Barthes notes that a journal has four main characteristics: it presents a text imbued with a writer's style or individuality; it records the "traces of a period" in exacting detail; it presents the author "as an object of desire" in the sense that one is interested in the intimate details of his or her life; and, lastly, the journal represents a "workshop of sentences" whereby the author refines his craft and contends with the mutability of language (1982:481–482). Barthes adds that the journal also symbolises an attempt by an author to combine his or her lived and textual lives, to merge the two so that a unified sense of identity can result. But an author is by definition a fragmentary and discontinuous construct, and thus the journal can be no 'truer' an account of that identity than anything else the author produces.

In other words, I never get away from himself. And if I never get away from myself, if I cannot manage to determine what the Journal is 'worth', it is because its literary status slips through my fingers: on the one hand, I experience it, through its facility and its desuetude, as being nothing more than the Text's limbo, its unconstituted, unevolved, and immature form; but on the other hand, it is all the same a true scrap of that Text, for it includes its essential torment ... By which it must be understood that it cannot prove, not only what it says, but even that it is worth the trouble of saying it. (Barthes 1982:494–5)

The crucial difference between Delany's autobiography and Peplow and Bravard's biography is that the former contains a lot of chaff, while the latter concentrates on the polished kernels of the author's life: those events, happenings, and circumstances that can reasonably be interpreted as having had some significance to the future development of the author's life and/or career. However, the detritus of daily living that clutters Delany's account is equally important as it gives the reader insight into the author's mind itself, as well as demystifying and decentralising the position of the author as a privileged representative of experience.²³

Another important event that Delany includes, but Peplow and Bravard exclude, is how he came to the realisation that what he wished to pursue in his literary career was SF. The jacket description recounts that Delany, "walking across the Brooklyn Bridge one spring afternoon, decided to commit his full intellectual and

²³ One is reminded of William Wordsworth's question 'What is a Poet?': "He is a man speaking to men: a man, it is true, endued with more lively sensibility, more enthusiasm and tenderness, who has a greater knowledge of human nature, and a more comprehensive soul, than are supposed to be common among mankind; a man pleased with his own passions and volitions, and who rejoices more than other men in the spirit of life that is in him; delighting to contemplate similar volitions and passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe, and habitually impelled to create them where he does not find them" (Wordsworth 1820).

artistic energy to writing SF" (1990). By representing this event in such stark isolation, it is robbed of its entire context, so that the event becomes excluded from the processes of its realisation. In other words, the parallel column of the narrative is ignored. This is a fundamental problem with Delany as a critical and biographical subject: he partakes of so many marginalities himself – black, gay, academic, SF writer, once married to a female Jewish poet – that to attempt to write about him means inevitably to descend to a level of pat generalisation that can tidy up and rearrange this messy and divergent complexity into a neat bundle of influences and expectations.

That evening on the bridge I decided, about as cold-bloodedly as any twenty-year-old could who'd suddenly realised that, through a largely preposterous fluke, part of his meagre livelihood might now come from making novels, that, in my SF, I would try for science-fictional effects comparable to those that, in my other reading, had so struck me. (Delany 1990:172)

Delany's use of the phrase 'making novels' refers to writing as a particular craft, but can also be taken to suggest that the creative process is as intimate as procreation itself. What is interesting is the suggestion that Delany's commitment to SF was the result of an evolutionary process, as opposed to an instantaneous conversion. Similarly, Delany's more recent writing on pornography and gay issues represents such a process of assimilation, as he attempts to transcribe, and propel, the silent parallel discourse into the privileged mainstream narrative of everyday life. The most fascinating, and perhaps ultimately the most revealing, aspect of this autobiography is that the reader learns that Delany's SF output is only a byproduct of an extraordinary life – and that only in his later years has he attempted to articulate the circumstances of this formative period, and indeed to transform these circumstances into his fictional oeuvre:

But I no more considered writing about what the women who came to my house were talking about than I would have considered discussing with my mother-in-law, over Friday night's overdone roast beef, the mutilated cock in the men's room. (1990:168)

Another important aspect of Delany's autobiography, and which is related to Barthes's notion of the pleasure of the text, is its strong Dionysian impulse. Delany writes that "the parallel column containing the discourse of repetition, of desire ... forever runs beside one of positive, commercial, material analysis" (1990:204). In other words, any transaction, behaviour, or event is underpinned by the dominant discourse, which comprises the prevailing power relations that circumscribe society. Barthes questions whether a text is "an anagram of the body", in the sense that it can

be said to have a human form or figure, which recomplicates the notion of “the infinite perversity of the critic and of his reader” (1975:17), as when attempting to unravel the most intimate textual secrets of an author’s work. Barthes goes so far as to label a text as a “fetish object” (1975:27), arguing that, “no sooner has a word been said, somewhere, about the pleasure of the text, than two policemen are ready to jump on you: the political policeman and the psychoanalytical policeman”:

An old, a very old tradition: hedonism has been repressed by nearly every philosophy; we find it defended only by marginal figures Pleasure is continually disappointed, reduced, deflated, in favour of strong, noble values: Truth, Death, Progress, Struggle, Joy, etc. Its victorious rival is Desire: we are always being told about Desire, never about Pleasure. Desire has an epistemic dignity, Pleasure does not. It seems that (our) society refuses (and ends up by ignoring) bliss to such a point that it can produce only epistemologies of the law (and of its contestation), never of its absence (1975:57)

In other words, the parallel column is destined to remain unarticulated or hidden behind the veil of the prevailing social order. But now and again that veil is snatched aside, and we can gain a privileged insight into the alternative discourse – in the same way that a reader feels privileged at sharing the implied intimacy of a text with its author. In this vein Delany argues in his autobiography that “the first direct sense of political power comes from the apprehension of massed bodies” (1990:266). In other words, politics springs from the human body as a tangible and lived reality, and is not just the product of social forces, or a site of contestation for opposing discourses. Writing about his first visit to St Marks Baths in New York, Delany recounts the libidinal shock of entering a room that was “an undulating mass of naked, male bodies, spread wall to wall” (1990:265):

Only the coyest and the most indirect articulation could occasionally indicate the boundaries of a phenomenon whose centres could not be spoken or written of, even figuratively: and that coyness was medical and legal as well as literary; and, as Foucault has told us, it was, in its coyness, a huge and pervasive discourse. (Delany 1990:268–69)

The Motion of Light in Water can be said to be Delany’s attempt to place himself in that discourse in terms of his own history and experiences, and to articulate it for himself and his readers. He warns that “a writer’s evaluation of his/her own work is probably the least trustworthy judgement” (1990:276), and surely this applies to the author’s life as well. But this is not the point, for Delany himself states that it is not a ‘true’ autobiography, but a memoir or a “collection of fragments” (1990:348). The theme of the autobiography is “trying to bring out some single and unified meaning from the chaos of memory” (1990:313–314). A related theme, of course, is

trying to interpret the signifier 'Delany' – a process that is not nearly as simple as it sounds. Foucault comments that the relationship between a text and an author refers to a specific "manner in which the text points to this 'figure' that, at least in appearance, is outside it and antecedes it" (1984:101). In other words, the author is both part of, and separated from, his or her own text; he or she produces the text and, in turn, is also defined by this process. Foucault states that this raises the important question of whether it matters who is speaking. This arises because of several dominant characteristics of contemporary writing, or *écriture* (recalling Barthes's definition of the two main sorts of writers). First, Foucault points out that "today's writing has freed itself from the dimension of expression":

Referring only to itself, but without being restricted to the confines of its interiority, writing is identified with its own unfolded exteriority. This means that it is an interplay of signs arranged less according to signified content than according to the very nature of the signifier. Writing unfolds like a game (*jeu*) that invariably goes beyond its own rules and transgresses its limits. In writing, the point is not to manifest or exalt the act of writing, nor is it to pin a subject within language; it is, rather, a question of creating a space into which the writing subject constantly disappears. (Foucault 1984:102)

This is precisely the effect that Delany achieves in *The Motion of Light in Water*. He transgresses the limits and conventions of the autobiographical genre in a kind of textual game that does not pin himself down as a subject like a specimen on a dissecting board, but uses language to create a signifiatory space in which this game of identity and allusion/illusion can be played out to maximum effect. Second, Foucault says that writing has a particular relationship to death. Whereas narrative used to be seen "as something designed to ward off death" (1984:102) – in other words, immortalising its subject in writing – it is now seen as contributing to the death of the author him- or herself. This is a logical outcome of the view that writing creates a space of signifiatory obfuscation in which an author is effaced or dispersed:

Using all the contrivances that he sets up between himself and what he writes, the writing subject cancels out the signs of his particular individuality. As a result, the mark of the writer is reduced to nothing more than the singularity of his absence; he must assume the role of the dead man in the game of writing. (Foucault 1984:102-103).

Foucault examines various concepts in order to elaborate the notion of the death of the author. The function of criticism is not to elucidate the relationship between work and author, nor to reconstruct a particular thought or experience

through the medium of the text, but to look at the work as an architectural edifice with its own structure, intrinsic form, and play of internal relationships (Foucault 1984:103). This raises the question of “what is this curious unity which we designate as a work?” (1984:103):

Even when an individual has been accepted as an author, we must still ask whether everything that he wrote, said, or left behind is part of his work ... And what about the rough drafts for his works? ... The deleted passages and the notes at the bottom of the page? ... What if, within a workbook filled with aphorisms, one finds a reference, the notation of a meeting or of an address, or a laundry list: Is it a work, or not? (Foucault 1984:103)

Foucault is questioning the boundary between an author’s ‘work’ in the form of the writing that he or she produces, and the life or lived existence of that author. This boundary is not as artificial or definite as the cover of a book: text and lived reality spill over and interweave in a constant interplay. Perhaps it is for this reason that Delany has structured his autobiography in the form of a journal, for this acknowledges that the boundary between text and life is contiguous. Similarly, he includes omitted journal pages at the end of *Triton* to subvert the notion that a novel is a closed or holistic entity. The messy spillover engendered by this inclusion transgresses the boundary between the author’s work and the lived reality of which it is an expression or an affirmation.

What, then, is an author’s name, and how does it function? What do we mean when we say ‘Delany’, for example? This question is critical if we are to examine the space or absence left by the author’s disappearance.²⁴ Foucault urges that we must “follow the distribution of gaps and breaches, and watch for the openings that disappearance uncovers” (1984:105). As a proper name, ‘Delany’ is the equivalent of a description, for one can immediately say that he is the author of such-and-such a text. But “a proper name does not have just one signification” (1984:106), and therefore our description of ‘Delany’ can be widened to include the fact that he is a gay, black SF writer and academic. ‘Delany’ as proper name and author name are conflated; he has come to represent or stand for certain themes or issues that exist independently of who he is as a ‘real’ person – and even if this real person changes,

²⁴ Sometimes this disappearance can be literal, as with Thomas Pynchon climbing aboard a bus and vanishing into the hills when in 1963 *Time* magazine dispatched a photographer to bring back a picture of the 26-year-old prodigy. “The problem was Pynchon didn’t want his picture snapped – he reportedly felt his buck teeth made him look like Bugs Bunny” (Garner 2001).

such as through ageing, the signifiatory force underpinning his proper and author names will not diminish. In other words, the signifier 'Delany' has come to denote a particular discourse, and it is this particular discourse that defines a text as having been produced by Delany the author. Foucault writes:

It would seem that the author's name, unlike other proper names, does not pass from the interior of a discourse to the real and exterior individual who produced it; instead, the name seems always to be present, marking off the edges of the text, revealing, or at least characterising, its mode of being. The author's name manifests the appearance of a certain discursive set and indicates the status of this discourse within a society and a culture. (1984:107)

Foucault then examines discourses imbued with what he terms the 'author function', which is "characteristic of the mode of existence, circulation, and functioning of certain discourses within a society" (1984:107). Such a discourse has certain features: discourses are "objects of appropriation" in that there are strict rules governing such aspects as author rights, author-publisher relations, and rights of reproduction. This holds out the possibility that discourses can be transgressive if any of these rules are flouted (1984:108). Foucault points out that "the author function does not affect all discourses in a universal and constant way" (1984:109). For example, 'scientific' and 'literary' texts are perceived differently with regard to the role of the author, as are autobiography and fiction, for example. The corollary of this is that the author function is the result of a "complex operation" (1984:110) revolving around the concept of the 'author'. If the relationship between discourse and author function is so complicated, then how "can one attribute several discourses to one and the same author?" (1984:110).

How can Delany be perceived as an SF writer and a purveyor of gay polemic at one and the same time? The answer is that "the author is also the principle of a certain unity of writing – all differences having to be resolved, at least in part, by the principles of evolution, maturation, or influence" (1984:111). The fact that Delany is active in SF, gay polemic, literary criticism, and other genres does not indicate terminal dissonance. His forays into gay polemic, for example, are the result of a long process of elucidation and experimentation spread out over an entire career in which various ideas and concepts were tried and tested, and finally received unified expression in such diverse works as *The Mad Man* and *Bread and Wine*. The author is central to this view, as he or she is the lynchpin to providing a comprehensive

encapsulation of his or her career. This flies in the face of the idea that the author is effaced in a particular text, with all traces of individuality erased by the linguistic spaces created by writing. In terms of the author function, the author is central to signifying his or her own discourse. This 'discourse' may also be a tight knot of varying strands that have to be unraveled if the author's function is to be properly understood. Foucault explains somewhat lyrically:

It is easy to see that in the sphere of discourse one can be the author of much more than a book – one can be the author of a theory, tradition, or discipline in which other books and authors will in turn find their place. (1984:113)

I believe that this is Delany's singular achievement with *The Motion of Light in Water*. By painting his early forays in SF into the larger canvas of his extraordinary life, Delany extends the frame in which he has been operating. In effect, he paves the way for such masterpieces as *The Mad Man*, and simultaneously illuminates and legitimises similar thematic concerns in his SF. His autobiography is like a vast deconstruction of the signifier 'Delany'; like an intricate flower, it is opened up into a much richer signifiatory space – the space of the endlessly deferred margin.

Delany's discourse is the discourse of marginality and desire. His own marginal status has always predisposed him to marginality in all its forms and guises. In a time of literary criticism where the notion of the author and his or her function in a text has been thoroughly dismantled, he has written an autobiography that both celebrates Barthes's notion of textual dissolution, as well as paradoxically celebrating his materiality as a living human being with desires and appetites. It also challenges Foucault's notion that the author is effaced in the course of his work, while simultaneously celebrating the elusiveness and ambiguity of the concept of the author function. As *The Motion of Light in Water* reveals, there is always room for another column in the parallel discourse that traces the prevailing order of things.

Conclusion

The Place of Excrement¹

Wisdom, like other precious substances, must be torn from the bowels of the earth (Foucault 1965:22)

Discussing Delany's theoretical contribution inevitably means tackling the thorny issue of defining SF itself. Damien Broderick neatly avoids this pitfall by stating, at the outset, before launching into an explication of Delany's own brand of semiotics, that "we must ask if the notion of [SF] as a genre needs to be replaced or expanded" (1995:37). Bearing this in mind, we can see how Delany's perceptions and theories push the envelope of traditional SF theory. This promises to be far more fruitful than the conventional approach of forcing Delany's writing to conform to some preconceived critical mould, and then analysing the bits that stick out, or that do not fit (and often lopping them off as part of a literary pruning exercise).

Broderick argues that we need to see SF as a 'mode' instead of as a 'classical genre', and its constituent texts as forming part of a "specialised [SF] 'mega-text'" (1995:37). In other words, SF is a particular process of literary production and consumption. Rather than being an immutable object, it is part of the dynamic

¹ This is the title of Part Four of *The Mad Man*, the opening line of which is equally memorable for its declarative simplicity: "The remainder of this tale is a love story" (Delany 1994b:333). The Yeats poem that the title refers to, 'Crazy Jane Talks with the Bishop', is quoted at the beginning of Part Five, 'The Mirrors of Night' (only lines 14-18). The full poem is as follows:

I met the Bishop on the road
And much said he and I.
'Those breasts are flat and fallen now,
Those veins must soon be dry;
Live in a heavenly mansion,
Not in some foul sty.'

'Fair and foul are near of kin,
And fair needs foul,' I cried.
'My friends are gone, but that's a truth
Nor grave nor bed denied,
Learned in bodily lowliness
And in the heart's pride.

'A woman can be proud and stiff
When on love intent;
But Love has pitched his mansion in
The place of excrement;
For nothing can be sole or whole
That has not been rent. (Yeats 2001).

expression of “the epistemic fiction of Western scientific culture” (1995:64). Broderick centres Delany firmly in this critical and cultural milieu by arguing that he is “the most persuasive theoretician of [SF] as that species of storytelling native to a culture undergoing epistemic changes implicated in the rise and supersession of technical-industrial modes of production, distribution, consumption and disposal” (1995:64). This is clearly a Marxist theory of literature, which David Forgacs notes “is a theory of economics, history, society and revolution before it has anything much to do with literary theory” (1986:166). Forgacs’s somewhat disapproving tone can be seen to reflect the attitude that the purity of ‘literature as literature’ must not be despoiled by some secondary link to social reality.

But the strength of a Marxist – and, by implication, Delany’s – approach is precisely its link to a larger legitimising context. In this context Delany can best be understood in all his enigmatic and elusive totality – as “anomaly and paradigm conjoined: black, gay, father, dyslexic college drop-out, multiple prize-winning and bestselling [SF] and fantasy novelist” (Broderick 1995:64). This is also how we can best comprehend the evolutionary path from such disparate novels as *Babel-17* to *The Mad Man*, and how they form part of the mega-text of Delany’s own corpus. In my view, the fundamental question when attempting to come to terms with Delany is how to reconcile such disparate novels; how such a promising SF author, pushing the boundaries of a commercial genre into the stratosphere of literary theory, could meander through such a cross-pathed career to end up with *The Mad Man*, a rather lurid gay thriller.

In attempting to deal with this conundrum, many fans and readers have compartmentalised Delany in order to render him safe and comprehensible. They only read his SF, ignoring his gay polemic, pornography, and even his literary theory as beyond their capacity of understanding or life experience. This is nonsensical: one does not have to be a sado-masochist, or even homosexual, in order to enjoy and understand *The Mad Man*, in exactly the same way as one does not have to be an alien from Mars in order to enjoy and understand *Babel-17*. Once one begins to view Delany’s corpus as a mega-text, as Broderick suggests, then you can begin to appreciate Delany’s particular and revolutionary achievement: that *Babel-17* and *The Mad Man* can be read in exactly the same way, and are indeed part of a single text defining Delany’s continuing evolution of the themes and interests that are uniquely

his own. Through his theory of SF as a particular mode of reading – that is, a process of production and consumption with its own internalised rules and conventions – Delany has offered the key to comprehending *Babel-17* in the context of *The Mad Man*, and vice versa.

One of the literary effects that SF strives for is cognitive estrangement or ‘sense of wonder’, namely immersion in an experience or reality far removed from the reader’s own. *Babel-17* details a far-future galactic empire and its fight for survival; *The Mad Man* details the marginal underbelly of a prototypical present-day city. Both are equally exotic; indeed, it could be argued that *The Mad Man* is as much SF as *Babel-17*. The boundary between so-called SF and so-called gay fiction is only one amongst many that Delany crosses or dislocates: the boundary between his work and his life, the boundary between SF and canonical literature, the boundary that separates his own novels from each other due to conventional classification are all breached. All boundaries and distinctions are dissolved and ruptured in the postmodern concatenation of Delany’s oeuvre, the realisation of which is a detonation like the Heraclitean fire consuming all difference at the apocalyptic conclusion of *The Mad Man*, or Rydra Wong’s final induction into the mystery of *Babel-17* and its dissolution of the self.

A typical example of how the themes of *Babel-17* and *The Mad Man* can be conflated in a meaningful and intelligent manner is provided in Delany’s short story ‘Among the Blobs’ (1991). It begins with a protagonist named Joe on a subway car accidentally bumping into a woman, describing the feeling of the impact as “not a pain nor even a feeling, but rather a sensational ghost, an unformed blob, where she had lurched against his army jacket” (1991:431). The word ‘blob’ provides the reader with his or her first link to the title, which sounds like a lurid B-movie pastiche. Then the story segues seamlessly into just such a pastiche, hurtling the reader into a totally different cognitive realm:

(2) And Bat D–, in a rocket of luciprene-6 with vytrol fittings, careened at ballistic speeds through interstellar night. Flakes had fallen off the black, letting light: stars. Bat was dubious and alert ... His would be the first human encounter with the Blob – which had been reported flûchûlâting (a form of communication? digestion? play?) in sector E-3. Till this report Bat D–, of the blazing death-laser, slayer of twenty-seven seven-foot Uranites, hero of the Kpt rebellion on Formalhaut-G, had poohed the existence of the Blobs, but the closer his luciprene hull swooped toward Galactic Council, the more

indubitable seemed the Blob's particular order of ontological resolution – what an earlier, less vulgar epoch would have called her 'reality'. (Delany 1991:431-432)

Bat D– and Joe seem to be mirror characters, with the subway car becoming a spaceship, and the female that Joe bumps into becoming the female Blob. Getting off the subway car and moving through the rush-hour press of people, Joe thinks “of these crowds as a Blob, to which he was by and large indifferent” (Delany 1991:432). Joe has a particular gendered relationship to these people, which the story then amusingly classifies: he is “vaguely resentful” (Delany 1991:432) of getting into too-close contact with the men as “they might suspect he was not a heterosexual lustful-panting-monster”. He is equally “vaguely resentful” of brushing against the women, “since everyone knew all men were heterosexual lustful-panting-monsters”. In the case of accidental contact, he had to “come on far more deferentially than any normal human should be expected to establish that, indeed, he was *not* a heterosexual lustful-panting monster” (1991:432-433):

At twenty-six, actually, he knew how to deal with the men: stand or sit where you want and fuck 'em. They could move. The women, however, confused him a little, bewildered him. (Delany 1991:433)

Joe's ambivalence or lack of knowledge about women seems to be contrasted with Bat D–'s quest for the elusive Blob: the former's quest for identity and assimilation is transformed into the latter's physical quest for the elusive alien. The story follows Joe into a public restroom, and then it abruptly shifts to the Galactic Council:

Each member entered the High and Icy Hall (here and there still crossed with traces of unbreathable fumes) to linger, silently and intently for an arbitrary while, before what looked to Bat D– for all the world like something from a book on Twentieth-Century toilet fixtures. (Delany 1991:433)

This is the public restroom rendered alien by SF, with the fumes referring to the antiseptic miasma in Joe's version of reality, and the members pausing before what could only be urinals. The transition back to Joe is made more abrupt by its explicit detail:

(5) Joe lingered at the next-to-the-end urinal. He had a thing for older guys with big, heavily veined cocks and small hands with overlong nails ...
(Delany 1991:434)

Two things are clarified immediately by this scene: that Joe is, indeed, not a “heterosexual lustful-panting-monster”, and that, in terms of his own social context, he is as alien and exotic as Bat D-. What Delany achieves with the juxtaposition of Bat D- and Joe is to reverse the automatic, and genre-conditioned, perception that the former is the exotic and marginal element in the story. This is brought about through the text’s insistence on Joe’s obvious distance from ‘normal’ social reality. Joe is only an ‘ordinary’ person in that he is human – his sexual proclivity automatically assigns him the status of a possibly dangerous, and perverted, deviant. When this deviancy is clarified in the story, the nagging suggestion in the reader’s mind that he could be imagining Bat D- as a front for his own tenuous grip on reality gains significance. The continuing detail in the scene is as precise as the description of Bat D- and his interstellar mission, and helps to concretise Joe’s reality.

While it is a given of SF as a genre to invent such detail in order to anchor it in a fictitious, or suspended, reality, it usually eschews explicit detail about sexual habits, for example, as such a focus on the corporeal could make it harder to sustain a suspension of disbelief.² It is also interesting to note how Delany begins the story with Joe’s musings and misgivings about women, but then transforms this misogyny into a smokescreen for a deeper deviancy.

A bum lurched through the door (probably not as old as this guy beside him with those long, long nails the colour of aluminium in winterlight. In his own too wide, too horny hand, at the memory only a second old – rather than what was beside him – Joe hardened), moustache full of mucous, missing a lot of hair over one ear, missing shirt buttons; and the breast pocket gone. His pants leg was ripped, knee to cuff, showing a shin like a soap. (Delany 1991:434)

The ‘bum’, surely at a lower rung of the social ladder than Joe himself, has no delusions about what he encounters in the public restroom, and his disgust and reprobation are immediate and automatic: ““Aw, Jesus Christ, nothin’ in here but a bunch of ...”” (1991:434). The exact word is left unspoken, indicating, through

² Or it could be that SF, like detective and romance fiction, is simply very conservative due to its need to please a wide audience.

silence, the marginality of the activity (which yet finds space to express itself in the silences and interstices of the social matrix).

It is clear that the 'bum' does, indeed, regard homosexuals as a lower example of the species than his own fallen status. Delany uses the 'bum' as the voice of moral outrage, by implication that of the 'reasonable reader', but the fact that his dismissal is uttered by such a clearly repulsive figure, whose mucous-laden moustache makes Joe's erection seem even more abnormal in the circumstances, reveals just how prejudicial and subjective such 'moral outrage' actually is. At this point it is unclear where Delany intends to take the story, for what started off as SF pastiche has unexpectedly been grounded in graphic social realism of a decidedly odd bent. While a clear sense of humour comes through in the ruminations of Bat D-, there is a disturbingly intense lasciviousness to the activities of Joe back in the 'normal' world.

Delany has set up an artificial boundary between the two parts of his story, perhaps as a reflection of the boundary between SF and mainstream literature itself, but now he is crossing his own boundary by dislocating convention and expectation. Ironically, this is precisely what SF attempts to achieve with cognitive estrangement or sense of wonder (though Delany's intention is perhaps closer to Barthes's *jouissance*). The reader becomes acutely aware of this effect of dislocation when

To Joe's right, two members of the Galactic Council glanced at each other, smiled. One shook his head. Hands down before white porcelain, busy with calculations, they manipulated and manipulated. (Delany 1991:434)

At this point, the two separate realities of the story seem to merge, but the ontological tension between the two is maintained, and even heightened, because it is unknown if Joe actually saw the Galactic Council members or not. Joe's experience in the restroom ends with orgasm or consummation, suggesting a teleological climax. The use of the word 'lens' to refer to glasses (another indication that Joe is not a prime human specimen) makes the scene oddly alien:

Joe turned back to the man beside him: grey hair, Vandyke beard, glasses. They exchanged glances, anxious, enthusiastic, eye to lens, lens to groin. That crank (Joe had grown up in Seattle), those nails: Joe felt the warmth of orgasm heating the backs of his knees. (Delany 1991:435)

Just as the reader seems to be getting into the flow of the story, as it were, it shifts again abruptly to Bat D-'s climactic encounter with the Blob, whose femaleness is accentuated by the previously all-male interaction:

She quivered there within the high, luminous geometries of Sumpter VII, contracting her gargantuan bulk inward from those bloated pseudopods into which her viscid soap-collared stuffs had spread. Nucleoli and vacuoles and just plain bubbles puckered her membrane. She could sense him, Bat could tell. Languorously, she heaved herself forward. (Delany 1991:435-436)

This description seems as graphic as that of the 'bum' in the restroom, but because it is of a fictitious creature, its physical reality is distanced from the reader. That is, its impact is muted, with cognitive estrangement here functioning as a sort of shield to prevent ontological contamination of the reader's own sense of reality.

However, precisely due to the graphic nature of what transpired in the restroom – which distorts conventional human sexuality, but is still recognisably human – this description of the Blob assumes a heightened immediacy and obscenity, particularly with reference to its lack of form and its bulk, and the use of such suggestive words as 'membrane', 'puckered' and 'stuffs'. What follows is another version of the climactic moment in space opera when man and beast, alien and human, clash and meet: Bat D- employs his 'death-laser' – a phallic referent to Joe's own deployed member? The Blob replies: "'Burple, burble ... burble'" (1991:436), rather deflating the seriousness of the occasion (or underlining the absurd inadequacy of language in such a situation). Bat D- fires, and is promptly attacked by the Blob, though the word 'attacked' is a pale approximation of the shockingly intimate encounter between the two. The description recalls Joe's sense of impending orgasm as a feeling of penetrating, permeating warmth:

She smacked him with a strange and violet warmth that flattened him to the ground. She rolled across him, was in him at every orifice – ears, urethra, anus, mouth, nostrils. She was without him. She was within him. She rolled through him. She flowed around him. (Delany 1991:436)

This all-engulfing experience goes beyond the superficiality of a mere sexual encounter to approach what can only be described as a merger between the two. The violence and totality of the act also represents a kind of rape, with the Blob invading every orifice in an approximation of male sexual violation. It is also a symbolic

representation of the assimilation of the strange or alien, in which both parties are changed irrevocably by the physical act of union. What transpires next is the most radical moment of dislocation or discontinuity in the whole story, shattering all preconceived notions of the Blob and, indeed, the entire world of Bat D-. Whereas all previous dislocations are earmarked by parenthetical numbers, this one is embedded smoothly in the text itself, and flows with it, through it, and around, saturating it with its consequences just as the Blob embraced Bat D-:

While he lay, gloriously stalled within her circling torque, with her within him within her, the Blob said: "Honey, what's *with* this shit resenting strange niggers on the subway? *That* sort of double-think earns you no popcorn coupons from the Big Movie Theatre in the sky. Try to imagine an older, less vulgar epoch. Just be your sweet self – you *have* a lovely smile. But Lord, this luciprene is getting to me. Tastes like old airplane glue!" (Delany 1991:436-437)

Although we are firmly in the context of the Blob, the reference to the subway disconcertingly returns us to Joe's world, while the reference to "strange niggers" leads to a lucent flash of comprehension that Joe must be black *and* gay. The last thing the reader expects is the Blob speaking like a streetwise black person (and in particular to Bat D-, as this is more appropriate to Joe, suggesting that the two are one and the same person). The reference to the unpalatable taste of luciprene is both comic and a sly reference to the acts of fellatio in the restroom. It also confirms the ontological centre of the Blob's version of reality, meaning that the reader is doubly disconcerted (just as Joe is doubly marginalised).

Delany's point is that perhaps black gay people are just as alien to normal society as a make-believe creature like the Blob. Indeed, they pose a threat to conventional social morality, and could be seen as a negative influence on others. When Bat D- attempts to shoot the Blob – that is, to act like a typical aggressor or violator – the Blob attempts to assimilate him (and also to neutralise his ability to counterattack) in order to make him aware of her nature so that he does not have to fear her alienness, and instead can become enriched through this symbolic merger. What he finds, to his utmost surprise (and no doubt that of the reader), is that the supposed alien converses with him on Joe's level – as a gay black male. The Blob escapes, and we return to the restroom, where "Joe leaned his forehead on the tile

above the urinal, taking deep breaths” – not because he is actually Bat D– and is recovering from the encounter, but due to his exertions with the older man:

The man beside him zipped his fly, squeezed Joe’s jacketed elbow (with that *fine* hand), and whispered: “You know, fellow, you really get into it, don’t you?” (One of the Council’s feyer members had actually applauded. Another had gotten scared and run). (Delany 1991:437)

The immediate question posed by this story is why Delany combines the two distinct narrative strands. Does it not detract from the social realism of Joe and the attendant message about marginality and tolerance to have this intertwined with a pastiche of SF tropes? And does not the SF pastiche emerge even more garish and fake for the contrast with the sordid realism of Joe and the restroom? ‘Among the Blobs’ is a difficult read, and is likely to frustrate conventional SF readers. But this is Delany’s aim. He is attempting to show that the props of SF are not just literary scaffolding holding up the conventions of a skimpy story, but can form the skeleton for pressing issues and themes to be built upon. SF’s playfulness and intertextuality expose a new horizon of signification, and offer the opportunity to rejuvenate what is often perceived to be a juvenile genre.

‘Among the Blobs’ can be seen as an experiment that takes the marginal genre of SF, and contrasts it with social realism on the edge of ordinary society. In so doing, Delany breaks down the artificial boundary between SF and the world, and shows how SF, by imaging far distant futures, is actually reinvigorating the present by engaging in a purposeful dialectic with the here and now. This boils down to a declaration of intent: SF *is* serious fiction. Another lesson offered by the story is the particular modes of reading it engages, and what this means for how we interpret and understand everyday reality around us. Commenting on his first collection of critical essays, *The Jewel-Hinged Jaw* (1977), Delany writes in the Preface:

The centre provides a fine view of certain aspects of our object of consideration and a very poor one of others. Among the poorest it provides is a view of that object’s edges. (1977:12)

Combined with his view that his essays exhibited “a consistency in their movement toward a language model” (1977:12), it can be seen that the seeds of Delany’s interest in the ‘margin of the margin’ and structuralism were sown early. But Delany’s critical path has evolved and matured considerably since 1977, when he

took a resolutely formalist stance at the outset: "Put in opposition to 'style', there is no such thing as 'content'" (1977:33). It is clear why a literary-critical mode such as Russian Formalism would appeal to Delany – a school of literary theory that developed in Russia in 1915, it focused on 'literariness', or "the sum of 'devices' that distinguish literary language from ordinary language" (Baldick 1990:195-196).

In terms of SF, Delany wanted to delineate the devices that make it function as a genre, and to incorporate this into a single overarching theory. He argues that "a distinct level of subjunctivity informs all the words in an [SF] story at a level that is different from that which informs naturalistic fiction, fantasy, or reportage" (1977:43). Subjunctivity is the 'tension' that runs between signifier and signified. The 'subjunctivity level' for naturalistic fiction, for example, is something that 'could have happened', whereas that for fantasy is clearly something that 'could not have happened' (1977:44).

But when spaceships, ray-guns, or more accurately any correction of images that indicates the future appears in a series of words and marks it as [SF], the subjunctivity level is changed once more: These objects, these convocations of objects into situations and events, are blanketly defined by: *have not happened*. (1977:44)³

The particular subjunctivity level of SF has sub-categories as well, including events that 'might happen', such as "technological and sociological predictive tales"; events that 'will not happen', such as "science-fantasy stories"; and events that 'have not happened yet', such as "cautionary dystopias" (1977:44). Delany details this elaborate schema in order to outline the potentiality of SF. He argues that "the particular subjunctive level of [SF] expands the freedom of the choice of words that can follow another group of words meaningfully", but cautions that "it limits the way we employ the corrective processes as we move between them" (Delany 1977:44).

Clearly at this early stage of his theoretical development, Delany would have had great trouble with a story such as his own 'Among the Blobs', which deliberately conflates several subjunctivity levels, and makes rather a mockery of his neat theory of the purity of the various levels. In order to illustrate how these different levels work, Delany takes the sentence 'The red sun is high, the blue low' as an example. If this is read as naturalistic fiction, we can only judge the sentence in terms of what we

³ An interesting question is: could they have happened though? To what extent is SF about predicting or anticipating the future?

can observe, while fantasy allows us ‘pseudo-explanations’. But the sentence functions best in terms of SF,⁴ because in this instance it can be seen to draw on “the physically explainable universe”, which has “a much wide range than the personally observable” (Delany 1977:45). Delany comments on the agility of SF to turn comprehensible what is mere nonsense on other subjunctive levels:

The particular verbal freedom of [SF], coupled with the corrective process that allows the whole range of the physically explainable universe, can produce the most violent leaps of imagery. (Delany 1977:45).

But how do sentences combine to form an SF text, for example? Delany explains that we have to start with the proposition that “the story is what happens in the reader’s mind” (1977:36). As one word is read after the other, they accumulate in “numerous inter- and over-weaving relations”, but the process itself is “corrective and visionary rather than progressive” (Delany 1977:36). The result is that “each new word revises the complex picture we had a moment before” (Delany 1977:36-37). Broderick comments that this is an “unlikely but thoroughly engaging model of reading which Delany advances in some detail” (1995:66). What is clear is that SF is indeed a process of reading, in that information is presented to the reader that can only be evaluated or corrected in terms of later information. For example, the word ‘flütchuláting’ in ‘Among the Blobs’ is never explained properly, as it is fictitious, but we gradually gain a clearer picture of what it might mean as we learn more about the alien creature and her particular subjunctive or ontological level.

In his 1994 essay collection, entitled *Silent Interviews*, Delany maintains that the notion of SF as a way or process of reading has been “the fundamental notion governing most of my SF criticism for the last 15 years” (1994a:273). Therefore the importance of these early theoretical forays cannot be denied in shaping the trajectory of Delany’s critical path. Broderick comments that, while the validity of this “parable of the reading process” (1995:67) is questionable, particularly in the face of modern semiotics and linguistics, where the whole concept of words and their meanings is minutely analysed, “it nicely allegorises some of the processes of coding and decoding called up by genres and generic hybrids alike” (1995:67).

⁴ Delany comments dramatically: “Look! We are worlds and worlds away. The first sun is huge ... The landscape crawls with long red shadows and stubby blue ones ... Look at the speaker himself. Can you see him? You have seen his doubled shadow ...” (1977:40). The point is not so much that SF permits such flights of fancy, but that it renders them intelligible, purposeful, and entirely rational.

An important corollary of this is that the subjunctivity of SF can be seen as referring to a mega-text or “vast intertextual ‘hyper-text’: part encyclopaedia of knowledge drawn from current scientific data and theories, part iconography established in previous [SF], part generic repertoire of standard narrative moves, their probability-weighted variants, and their procedures for generating new moves” (Broderick 1995:67-68). Importantly, this approach also emphasises the close relationship between text and reader, as the reader is largely responsible for generating a text’s meaning – a relationship that Delany has developed throughout his career. However, his simple taxonomic classification of the subjunctive levels of different kinds of fiction was to develop into the recomplicated view that SF is ‘paraliterature’, or “received categorically other than ‘literature’” (Broderick 1995:70). If SF is a process of reading, then what prevents one applying a different kind of reading process; and would the results be the same? Broderick examines this question of demarcation:

Demarcation ‘becomes one with the problem of intention and richness: is it clear or unclear that the writer intended a particular complex to be employed; and is it clear or clear that a text reads richly under a particular protocol complex? The situation that continually contours our critical responsibility is this: we are free to read *any* text by *any* reading protocol we wish’. (Broderick 1995:71)

This problem is clearly illustrated in a story such as ‘Among the Blobs’: is it a mainstream story with SF elements added, or an SF story with mainstream elements included? And does the meaning or intention of the story change depending on which viewpoint is adopted? Another possibility, of course, is that Delany merely wanted to highlight the problem, without any desire for resolution: “‘The criterion is simply how useful and interesting the resultant discussion is, how it enriches our sense of the reading’” (Broderick 1995:71). However, Broderick argues that no text can be indeterminable, as it must, by definition, contain certain clues as to its subjunctive level, as it were:

... one cannot, finally, posit a plurality of effective reading codes without supposing that readers *do*, and should, strive to adjust their coding protocols on the assumption that the writer knowingly put some detectable set of codes into play in any given text, even if these codes are then pitted against one another in a self-reflexive novel ... (Broderick 1995:71)

As I have shown, Delany himself is a supreme practitioner of pitting codes against one another: Broderick uses the term 'allographer' to describe his vocation: "one who writes the Other" (1995:117). He continues that Delany "inscribes in his texts' signifiers and syntagms the elusive face of the excluded, the unadmitted ... the other" (1995:117).⁵ Broderick defines Delany's later development as a theoretician and writer as examining the cultural coding of society itself, and detailing alternative models of social reality in his fiction:

Delany has recently focused on the cultural schemata or scripts which underlie or imbricate those inscribed discourses we 'read' through our competency in cultural coding. Delany's own fictive discourse has increasingly involved a paradoxical search for rich ('valid') heuristic *models* of this kind which are immediately subjected to ceaseless revision, inversion and deconstruction. ... One principle way, for Delany, is by refusing to respect conventional limits between fiction and reflections on fiction. ... And it is in precisely this self-reflexive distancing ... that at last we are sure how appropriate it is to read Delany's fictions as allegories of their own production and consumption. (Broderick 1995:128-129,134)

How can a story like 'Among the Blobs' be interpreted as an allegory of its own production and consumption, and how valid is this to Delany's other fiction? 'Among the Blobs' models the process by which reality is constructed or mediated through language by presenting two seemingly similar but crucially divergent takes on parallel versions of a particular experienced reality. Neither reality is foregrounded to the extent that the reader can lay claim to the pre-eminence of one over the other. The two do not exist in a seamless dialectic; rather the seams are rough and obvious in order to highlight the juxtaposition.

Delany's concern with language and modelling is evident in as early a novel as *Babel-17*, so it seems distorting to argue that his critical path aspired to this particular developmental point. But how does such a disparate novel as *The Mad Man* share the same theoretical concerns? Is it a continuation of Delany's theoretical forays, or a branching into a totally different direction? How does this novel reflect on Broderick's notion that "one can trace through [Delany's] essays a critical trajectory

⁵ Broderick comments: "If his first published novel was a gaudy exercise in romantic quest, by his eighth he was writing a veritable mythology of undecidability, and this in 1966, before Derrida had arrived in America with the first tidings of deconstruction" (1995:117). This, of course, was *The Einstein Intersection*, "a meditation on difference and a manifesto for textual and cultural dissemination" (1995:117).

launched from a distrust of the content/form antithesis and peaking in an idiosyncratic blend of semiotics, Marxism, psychoanalysis and deconstruction"? (1995:67).

First, it is important to note that *The Mad Man* is very much a novel of the 'other' – namely, that which is excluded from society or exists on its periphery or margin. In SF terms, this 'other' is often categorised as being 'alien' in the sense that it is physically removed from Earth in terms of space and evolutionary development. In *Babel-17*, these are the Invaders; in *The Mad Man*, they are simply homeless people, but the social periphery they inhabit in terms of their relation to the social centre is equally valid.⁶ By applying deconstruction to unravel the binaries and hierarchies that underpin our society, Delany reveals that this 'other' or 'alien' is a social construct, and how the power relations underpinning this binary opposition are constituted. Terry Eagleton offers the following exposition of one of the most fundamental binary oppositions, namely man/woman, of which the equivalent binary in SF is human/alien:

Woman is the opposite, the 'other' of man: she is non-man, defective man, assigned a chiefly negative value in relation to the male first principle. But equally man is what he is only by virtue of ceaselessly shutting out this other or opposite, defining himself in antithesis to it, and his whole identity is therefore caught up and put at risk in the very gesture by which he seeks to assert his unique, autonomous existence. Woman is not just an other in the sense of something beyond his ken, but an other intimately related to him as the image of what he is not, and therefore an essential reminder of what he is. Man therefore needs this other even as he spurns it ... (1983:132-133)

What Eagleton is saying is that the 'other', through its oppositional nature, also has a definitional role to play in anchoring social reality. The gap between the two is not a sterile divisive space; rather it is a sliding interface of active interpretation and reassessment. But Eagleton goes even further by stating that this very exclusion is the critical component of self-definition, for what is excluded is done so through fear and ignorance of contamination; the suppressed possibility is that the 'other' could

⁶ Ursula K Le Guin comments: "Where are the poor, the people who work hard and go to bed hungry? Are they ever *persons*, in SF? No. They appear as vast anonymous masses ... existing for one purpose: to be led by their superiors. ... I think it's time SF writers – and their readers! – stopped daydreaming about a return to the age of Queen Victoria, and started thinking about the future. I would like to see ... some serious consideration of such deeply radical, futuristic concepts as Liberty, Equality and Fraternity. And remember that about 53 per cent of the Brotherhood of Man is the Sisterhood of Woman" (1989:95-96).

become normal, and is, indeed, part of normality itself, and exists only because it is defined by that normality:

... one reason why such exclusion is necessary is because she may not be quite so other after all. Perhaps she stands as a sign of something in man himself which he needs to repress ... Perhaps what is outside is also somehow inside, what is alien also intimate – so that man needs to police the absolute frontier between the two realms as vigilantly as he does just because it may always be transgressed, has always been transgressed, and is much less absolute than it appears. (Eagleton 1983:132-133)

One of Delany's main interests is this 'absolute frontier' and its possible transgression. An example of how he turns his own texts into models of their own production and consumption is the dialogue or dialectic between KL Steiner, "a mathematician specialising in 'Naming, Listing, and Counting Theory'", and SL Kermit, a "gay but conservative archaeologist" (Broderick 1995:134).⁷ In 'The Tale of Plagues and Carnivals', Leslie and Kermit engage in a spirited discussion about the shortcomings of Delany's fictional account of the impact of an AIDS-like epidemic on a primitive society. Their main objection is that "inexorably the Discourse of the Master displaces everyone else's" (1989b:443-444). The Master represents the author, whose privileged position as arbiter of the text's meaning represents authoritarianism, conservatism and patriarchal society in general. By dislocating the traditional role of the Master/Author through such narrative devices as the SL Kermit/KL Steiner debate, Delany engages with the very constructedness of his own fiction, and holds this up as a mirror to social reality as well.

By blurring the boundary between generic protocols – introducing a strand of semiotic debate in *Babel-17*, disrupting the social realism of *The Mad Man* with a mythical beast traipsing around the Hudson, conflating SF elements and everyday events in 'Among the Blobs' – Delany is pushing the envelopes of the genres in which he works, and opening them up to new possibilities and potentialities. Ray

⁷ See, for example, Kermit's comments in *Neveryóna* (1988): "What is Grafton books? (Hopefully a more *recherché* line out of some small North English university press. But I doubt it.) And who is this Delany? ... Leslie used to be enamoured of a bizarre species of anti-literature (more generously called 'paraliterature' ...), published under gaudy paper covers – 'scientifiction' or some such. ... It sounds like she's gotten me involved, somehow, in this 'SF', as she used to call it. (She actually would try to get me to *read* the stuff!) If that's what she *has* gotten me involved with, I shall never be able to set boot in the mahogany-panelled halls of the Spade and Brush Club again. (Professor Loaffer will guffaw and bang me on the shoulder, and invite me for a pint, and ask rude questions about flying saucers until I have to say something rude in retort. ... (532-533).

Davis points out that “generic-specific content is not a sign of weakness. Only a sign of genre”, and goes on to point out that “a given piece of fiction can fit more than one set of protocols” (2000). ‘Literary’ reading protocols are characterised by their flexibility, meaning that they can be adapted or changed to suit an author’s own interpretation of a particular genre. This is a risky enterprise, because a ‘fan’ conditioned to a particular genre through repeated exposure has certain expectations, and might feel betrayed at the flaunting of convention (and then refrain from buying any more Delany titles). But what Delany demands from his readers – those who are prepared to read *The Mad Man* as easily as they would read *Babel-17*, for example – is to widen their reading horizons, through dislocation, and to go beyond the limitations of literary protocols and genre conventions:

... a fan of a genre, who responds positively to genre-specific content for its own sake, might appreciate within the genre more quickly (and feel more betrayed when genre conventions are sabotaged). But fannishness is not required. Sufficient to begin with is a willingness to let down one’s guard, to admit that a book devoted to telepathy and mutants can tell us things a mainstream book can’t. So can a book devoted to careful descriptions of sexual acts, although porn is especially subject to dismissal-by-genre content. (Davis 2000)

The explicit subject matter of *The Mad Man* seems to indicate that it is pornography. But the marginal sexual practices depicted, though graphic, are entirely consensual, and linked to a strong narrative development. This immediately confuses the book’s categorisation as gratuitous titillation. Indeed, this definition becomes dislocated, and the genre it is supposed to be shoehorned into is suddenly enriched with new possibilities. Similarly, the linguistic issues raised in *Babel-17* add a new dimension to the surface gloss of this unabashedly lurid space opera. Delany’s particular achievement with this practice of dislocation is that such concerns do not seem tacked on as peripheral dressing to the story at hand. He works within the strict confines of generic convention but, paradoxically, dislocates convention at the same time.⁸

⁸ Delany holds words (and worlds) up to the light to show them shimmer. A good metaphor for this is provided by the title of *The Motion of Light in Water*. Both seem transparent mediums, but a ray of light is diffracted and refracted by water to reveal the hidden palette of the colour spectrum. Delany does the same with genres and reading protocols: they shimmer into a colourful, and seemingly infinite, cascade of possible diversions and inversions.

The key question is not why Delany could produce such a 'perverse' novel as *The Mad Man*, which seems light-years apart from *Babel-17*, that should engage our attention, but why we respond to it in precisely this fashion. This response reveals the social conditioning that spurns the marginal and the outcast in order to stabilise the social fabric in terms of conventional social mores. It is also important to realise the scale of the obstacles that Delany confronts in *The Mad Man* – in a sense he is attempting to 'normalise' perversity, but he cannot do this in a tragic context that might suggest that the perversion itself is the cause of the hero's moral downfall. This requires a very delicate balancing act or, as Davis eloquently puts it, "a very different contract of marriage between heaven and hell, between desire and the world":

... to introduce the 'perverse' into a tragic situation is by default to imply that perversion itself is to blame. A serious story involving the perverse (that is, a story in which sexual activity plays a pivotal role, since all sexual activity, closely observed, partakes of the perverse) must ensure that 'perversity' in itself cannot be mistaken as the cause of a tragedy which would've been averted by some universal (and unexamined) 'normal' sexuality. Or at least it must do so if it's to have any hope of disturbing the status quo. (Davis 2000)

'Normal' sexuality remains unexamined, meaning it is taken for granted, precisely because the "history of sex in narrative art – particularly of gay and lesbian sex – is a history of double-cryptology, of codes which may be overlooked by the many" (Davis 2000). *The Mad Man* sets out to normalise transgressive sex by being "a realistic novel about promiscuous gay sex in the age of Reagan" (Davis 2000). Davis says that, given the "insanely dangerous" sexual habits it depicts – dangerous in the sense of HIV and even ordinary STD infection, in a time when the full consequences of Aids were first being fathomed – the most 'shocking' thing about the novel "is not just that it's so clear-sighted, but that it's so *happy*" (2000): "... the structural puzzles of Delany's other novels would be out of place here, in a book dedicated to the pleasure of shaping one's life – philosophical, economic, social, *and* sexual life – out of emotional and physical messiness" (2000). This is reflected in a straightforward and colloquial style that does not beat about the bush, so to speak, in conveying its message:

'Yeah ...!' The big man said, and took another swallow of beer. 'Ain't nothin' like peenin' on a white boy, is there?' Nodding to us, he turned – 'It just makes *everybody* feel good, don't it?' (Delany 1994b:143)

Broderick comments that Delany's literary theories, developed through his fictive texts, "urge deconstruction and the obliteration of auctorial centrality or regnancy", but notes that his stories "are blatantly derived from the stuff of biography" (1995:138) – even if this is equally blatantly denied, as in *The Mad Man*:

So while Delany is a declared poststructuralist, his fiction is articulated about a semiotic programme which seems, at its limit, to merge with humanist, albeit highly relativist, liberal pluralism. Even in his most strenuous efforts to attain the transgressive, to treat the human subject as an object of cultural manufacture, he seems to be writing his own life and his apologia for it from a position of extreme and admirable wilfulness. (Broderick 1995:138)

Delany's achievement lies equally in his decoding of cultural systems and institutions, and his transcription of his own lived experiences. This leads to the paradox that, while arguing that society is a construct, and the human subject is an "object of cultural manufacture", his own unique and irreducible individuality always comes to the fore. This leads David Samuelson to conclude that Delany "both clings to and defies genrefication" (Samuelson 2000), as his stated aim of dislocating genre boundaries can only take place within the context of genre itself: "Frequently dissolving borders between fiction and non-fiction, he interweaves critical, theoretical, and autobiographical elements into both" (Samuelson 2000). With regard to the explicit nature of *The Mad Man*, and what it might portend for Delany's future output, he notes that his age has had an impact on his subject matter:

As a gay man pushing fifty, I'm aware that the older person knows much of what she or he does about sex through the holes and absences in the personality its increasing failure begins to highlight.

Those absences are the site of *pure* desire – sometimes the most painful of states, which the young, by and large, simply do *not* have to contend with.

... I write about homosexuality because it's been the site of most of my own sexual experience. (Delany 1994a:219)⁹

Sex is an important subject matter, for questions of the flesh are entangled with questions of power relations, and how society mediates both desire and deviancy. Homosexuality, on the other hand, is equally important, because it is marginal to the

⁹ Delany notes that his sexual encounters are "down to about 75 to 100 times a year. Up until 1992, this was closer to 300 times a year. But then I established a permanent (open) relationship. I get an HIV test every year. And I remain HIV negative" (Delany 1999:461).

prevailing sexual discourse, and Delany's main area of concern is the marginal. He describes himself as "this weird Delany guy" (1999:119), and as "'a science fiction writer – a black science fiction writer, who dabbles in gay studies'" (1999:98). Delany adds that "of course you can't write effective fiction without putting something of yourself in it" (1999:120) – and in his autobiography, for example, he has shown how his life and fiction have merged from as early as *Babel-17*.

Delany's contention that he only 'dabbles' in gay studies seems disingenuous, for *The Mad Man* is his biggest novel in terms of length since *Dhalgren*, while his recent output, such as *Bread and Wine*, *Times Square Red/Times Square Blue*, and *Shorter Views*, are all about 'gay studies'. Is one to conclude, then, that the SF writer has been transformed into a gay writer? And what impact has the 'SF output' had on the 'gay writing' (and continues to have), and vice versa? Which aspect of Delany's marginality do we privilege in the discourse we construct around and about him? This leads to the problem of definition – of Delany himself, and of the margin in which he operates:

The idea of 'definition', with its suggestion of the scientific, can be associated easily with the idea of 'mastery' – which, in turn, can be easily associated with the idea of 'origin' and 'craft.' But the fact is, we do not master an art – and certainly we do not master it through knowing the 'proper definition' or 'mastering its origins' or simply learning its 'craft.' (Delany 1999:238)

In other words, Delany's authority on matters gay and black stems from the fact that he himself is gay and black. However, this does not mean that Delany can be 'defined' – only that he occupies a particular 'positionality'. It follows then that his experience of society, and the power relations that he is enmeshed in, differ from the experience and social subset of, say, a white straight SF writer. It also implies that Delany cannot ignore or subsume the fact that he is black and gay, even in his SF output, which ostensibly has nothing to do with these issues.

It's too easy to reduce the problem of 'the gay writer' to the split between those gay writers (like myself) who, on the one hand, feel that all art is political one way or the other and that all they write is from a gay position – and, in my case, from a black and male position as well – and those writers who, on the other hand, feel that all they write is fundamentally apolitical, even if it involves gay topics; that they are just writers who happen to be gay, or, indeed, black, or female, or male, or Jewish or what-have-you. (Delany 1999:111)

Delany states that, while he was married in 1961, by 1964 he had decided that he was gay. In 1967 he had published 'Aye, and Gomorrah ...', about a "future perversion, clearly an analogue of current homosexuality" (1999:90), and 'Time Considered as a Helix of Semi-precious Stones' in 1968, "about homosexual S&M which went on to win both a Nebula and a Hugo" (1999:90).¹⁰ Delany continues that, by 1969, "it was common knowledge throughout the [SF] field that I was gay" (1999:90), even though he was still living with his wife, Marilyn Hacker. In 1975, he taught his first university class and, within the first two weeks, told them that he was gay (1999:91). This sense of polymorphous identity led to the criticism that Delany's published persona differed from who he was in real life, and that he was in effect trying to pull the wool over reader's eyes.¹¹

In the middle seventies I received a harsh criticism from a gay friend because a biographical paragraph that appeared in the back of a number of my books mentioned that I was married to the poet Marilyn Hacker, that we had a daughter, and that Marilyn had won the National Book Award for Poetry. Not only was I trying to gain prestige through Marilyn's reputation ... I was falsely presenting myself as a straight man, happily married, with a family, even though in those years Marilyn and I no longer lived together. (Delany 1999:91).¹²

Delany recounts how, in 1977, he sat on a panel on 'gay SF' at the World Science Fiction Convention in Phoenix, Arizona, and remembers that "it was the first time I'd sit in front of an audience and talk about being gay" (Delany 1999:92).

After the panel had taken place, I was astonished how quickly I became 'Samuel R. Delany, the black, gay [SF] writer' in the straight media ... Any newspaper mention of me ... seemed obliged to tag me as gay (and black), and if the article was by a straight reporter, usually the tag appeared in the first sentence. (Delany 1999:93)

¹⁰ Delany states that he thought most readers would assume he was gay, but from my own personal experience, it did not even enter my mind when I read these stories (this was long before Delany's 'promiscuous autobiography' stage). One of the main aims of SF is to construct future social scenarios and, combined with the fact that one not familiar with gay culture would certainly not recognise this as an underscoring theme, the stories seemed simply to be radical versions of future societies.

¹¹ I think it was also inferred that, by identifying himself as being gay, Delany was perceived as admitting that his marriage had been a mistake or even a travesty. This is clearly incorrect: Delany came to the realisation that he was gay as part of a long process of 'coming out' and acceptance. He has a daughter, of course, and remains friends with his wife, who helped him in this process as well.

¹² Delany says he innocently included the fact about his wife's award out of a sense of altruistic pride. Conceding that "my friend's criticism had its point", he tried to change the blurb, but the exigencies of publishing meant that this only came into effect a year and a half later (1999:92).

This leads back to Delany questioning the value of definition, as it is a totalising phenomenon. By being ‘tagged’ in the media as a gay, black SF writer, a particular signification was being developed to represent his authorial and personal identity. Delany remarks that, “after only a little while, the situation began to seem vaguely hysterical, as if, through an awful oversight, someone might *not* know I was gay” (1999:93). This form of ‘tagging’ or identification is also a means of pigeonholing Delany, of getting a handle on who he is, and thereby preventing messy social contamination or slippage between the boundaries of society and any possibly transgressive forces.

Delany continues that, in the late 1970s, when his and Marilyn’s daughter was four, he was instrumental in establishing a gay fathers’ support group, known unofficially as The Daddies (his daughter’s term) (1999:93,96). By the mid-1980s, he was giving regular lectures in which the personal examples he cited came from his own life as a gay man (1999:94). In 1987 he began writing “a memoir, focusing specifically on changes in attitudes toward sex – gay sex at that – from 1955 through the sixties”. This, of course, was *The Motion of Light in Water*. All these varied incidents are examples of ‘coming out’, the term made fashionable at the time to describe the act of the public declaration of one’s homosexuality.¹³ This statement of sexual definition is as problematic as Delany being defined as a gay, black SF writer, for it places a boundary between homosexuality and the rest of society. As Delany notes, “there seemed to be an oppressive aspect of surveillance and containment intertwined with it” (1999:90-91):

One does not come out once. Rather, one comes out again and again and again – *because* the dominant discourse in this country is still one of heterosexist oppression and because it still controls the hysteria to *know* who’s gay and who’s not. Heterosexuals do not have to come out – indeed cannot come out – because there is no discursive pressure to deny their ubiquity (and, at the same time, deny their social contribution and the sexual validity of their growth and development, the event field-effect of their sexuality) and to penalise them for their existence. This is the same discourse that constrains ‘coming out,’ for all the act’s utopian thrust, to a condition of heterosexist surveillance. (Delany 1999:96-97).

¹³ Dr Deirdre Byrne, my thesis supervisor, instructed me to insert the following: “Somewhere, my dear, you need a footnote saying that you are gay”.

Delany says that 'coming out' in Phoenix "meant that the straight media could now define me, regularly, as a 'gay [SF] writer'" (1999:97). This placed a convenient label on him to make it easier for people to 'read' who he was, but Delany argues that he strongly resists the idea that such a label can reveal the totality of his identity. It is part of a greater societal discourse in which his marginality has to be partitioned off in order to accentuate its supplementary, or inferior, status. Delany notes that the experience of being gay "changed me, and changed me for the better" (1999:97):

... though [it] showed me much and changed my life in ways that I can only celebrate, I cannot claim that [it] *identified* or *defined* anything of me but only illuminated parts of my endlessly iterated (thus always changing) situation.

Firmly I believe that's how it should be. (Delany 1999:97)¹⁴

What is clear from this brief account of Delany's own 'coming out' process is that the discourse which states that *The Mad Man* is an aberration on the part of a successful and respected SF writer is a patently heterosexist construction, for the novel is the latest product in a long process of Delany using his own lived experience to fuel his fiction. It also leads to the larger problem of definition as a conceptual tool used to entrench a dominant discourse. By stating that Delany is a gay, black SF writer, have we come any closer to determining who he 'really' is, or just reiterated a simple statistical fact?

The rhetoric of singular discovery, of revelation, of definition is one of the conceptual tools by which dominant discourses repeatedly suggest there is no broad and ranging field of events informing the marginal. This is true of [SF] versus the pervasive field of literature; art as compared to social labour; blacks as a marginal social group to a central field of whites; and gay sexuality as marginal to a heterosexual norm. That rhetoric becomes part of the way the marginal is trivialised, distorted, and finally oppressed. (Delany 1999:74)

Delany avers that "it is in the margin between claims of truth and the claims of textuality that all discursive structures (that which allow us to read rhetoric) are formed" (1999:48). The fact that Delany is a gay, black SF writer and the output he

¹⁴ This applies to a 'genre definition' as well, which "is a wholly imaginary object of the same ontological status as unicorns, Hitler's daughter, and the current King of France. 'Definitions' of [SF] are impossible for the same reason that 'definitions' of poetry, the novel, or drama are impossible ... What we are dealing with here is a dialogue, a collection of dialogues, a set of debates, a range of ideas and a range of thinkers, of which only a larger or smaller fraction can be of interest to any particular person" (Delany 1999:148).

produces – which is not always SF; and, when ostensibly SF, is often disputed as such – produces a discursive or dialectic space in which a discourse can be generated. Delany's own marginality, and the paraliterary arena on which he is focused, produce a tension between them, and help to generate 'the margin of the margin' as a critical concept. Delany maintains that "a far more appropriate model for any art work is that which takes place in the margin of another margin. Thus the paraliterary arts, such as [SF], may become a privileged model for analysing the ways in which all art is produced, is disseminated, and functions" (1999:172). However, the word 'privileged' is problematic, for while paraliterature is conceived of as "a generically constant body of writing that lurks around outside the library of serious or authentic literature" (1999:203), there is a danger that new works are slotted into its 'upper ranks', or that Delany is perceived as its main proponent or representative, as demonstrated by his own work:

As an artist I (I want to add, 'of course') resist the idea of my work containing any summary of itself. As I understand it, such a summary would make – or at least take steps toward making – the rest of the work superfluous. (Delany 1999:123).

This leads Delany to position himself "at the particular boundary of the everyday that borders the unspeakable, where language, like a needle infected with articulation, threatens to pierce some ultimate and final territory – however unclear, as we approach it, that limit is (if not what lies beyond it) when we attempt analytic seizure" (1999:61). An example of such "analytic seizure" is the act of definition itself, while the "ultimate and final territory" Delany refers to is marginality itself, or the 'unspeakable':

The unspeakable is, of course, not a boundary dividing a positive area of allowability from a complete and totalised negativity, a boundary located at least one step beyond the forbidden (and the forbidden, by definition – no? – *must* be speakable if its proscriptive power is to function). If we pursue the boundary as such, it will recede before us as a limit of mists and vapours. Certainly it is not a line drawn in any absolute way across speech or writing. It is not a fixed and locable point of transgression that glows hotter and brighter as we approach it till, as we cross it, its searing heat burns away all possibility of further articulation. (Delany 1999:61)

Definition, therefore, does serve a purpose in that it permits articulation. Delany says that the notion of the 'unspeakable' as a fixed boundary between

normality and its transgression is false, for the closer we try to approach this boundary in either speech or writing, the further it recedes, until it dissolves totally in the dissolution of marginality. Instead of the concept of the boundary, it may be best to think of “a set of positive conventions governing what can be spoken of (or written about) in general” (Delany 1999:61). This is crucial, because “the forbidden, by definition ... *must* be speakable if its proscriptive power is to function” (Delany 1999:61). And speaking, or writing about, the ‘unspeakable’ helps to bring it into the ambit of normal discourse.

What margin does the unspeakable inhabit? Once again we are confronted with the problem of definition. Delany comments that “the unspeakable is always in the column you are not reading” (1999:65), and that, for him, difference “is still the source of information, of interest, or, indeed, of pleasure” (1999:133), with the aim of “the liberation of a range of subjects frequently marginalised under the rubric of ‘the perverse’” (1999:111). ‘Difference’, of course, refers to poststructuralism and the decoding of binary oppositions, and teasing out the power relations in which they are intertwined:

It is the story of two opposing forces whose right and proper relation is one of hierarchy, of subordination. It is the story of the battle of the sexes, the antagonism between man and woman whose right and proper positionality is for woman to stand beside, behind, and to support man. It is the story of the essential opposition between white and black whose proper resolution is for black to provide the shadows and foreground the highlights for white ... It is the Other as the locus, as the position, as the place where the all-important Self can indulge in a bit of projection ... It is the story in which the frail, fragile, and erring body is properly (as property, as an owned place) a vessel for the manly, mighty, and omnipotent mind; where masturbation (or, indeed, homosexuality or any of the other ‘perversions’) is a fall-back only when right and authentic heterosexuality is not available; where the great, taxing, but finally rich literary tradition, with its entire academically established and supported canon, occasionally allows us to give place for a moment to those undemanding (because they are without power to demand) diversions (those objects we find when we turn from our right place of traditional responsibility) of paraliterary production – mysteries, comics, pornography, and [SF]. (Delany 1999:143)

Bearing in mind Delany’s exhortation that he resists any summation of himself through his own work, one could hold up the above quote as a cogent and trenchantly ironic summation of his thematic concerns, with the poststructuralist mode of discourse providing “a good chance for us to forge a dialogue in which to speak with

both passion and precision” (1999:178). However, as with definition, Delany warns of a tendency within poststructuralist thinking towards “a totalising urge, a will to knowledge-as-power, a desire for mastery” (1999:141), which underpins those ‘themes’ outlined above. Poststructuralist philosophy teaches that ‘totalising urges’ “are distorting, biasing, untrustworthy, ideologically loaded, and finally blinding”, meaning that they “must be approached with continuous oppositional vigilance” (1999:141). This vigilance needs to be directed at the notion of a ‘theme’ itself:

... this same critique of the totalising impulse to mastery holds that even the social process of constituting a theme is, itself, an example of the same totalising urge. The critique holds: A ‘theme’ has the same political structure as a prejudice. (Delany 1999:141)

Delany explains that both theme and thesis derive from a Greek word meaning “to place, to pose, to posit, to position, or to let stand” (1999:141). This means that, from an etymological point of view, a ‘theme’ is grounded in the concept of “having, or holding to, a position” (1999:142), implying a predetermined ideological standpoint. The question then arises of what extent a particular theme is imposed on a text, and why these themes are imposed. What is the ideology underpinning these themes?

No matter how much we talk as if themes were objects we found present in, or positioned by, a text, this critique maintains that themes are actually patterns that we always impose *on* a text ... No matter how much we claim to have found objective evidence of one or another theme present in one or another text, the constitutive elements of that ‘theme’ have already been politically in place, i.e., posited, before we made the blind move of recognising it. (Delany 1999:142)

An important component of deconstruction is to maintain an “alert and severe analytical stance” toward themes (Delany 1999:142), particularly while dissolving such binary oppositions as those cited above. This is because of the possibility that, while deconstructing a hierarchy such as male/female, it may be simply inverted instead of being properly dismantled.

... the reversal of the hierarchy can only be an interim move to highlight the positionality under (over?) the content. But when the hierarchy fixes in its reversed form – which all too frequently happens – nothing changes in the oppositional structure’s characteristic organisation. (Delany 1999:145)

Indeed, this becomes one of the survival strategies of such hierarchies: inversion enables them “to recoup themselves and heal themselves against various attacks” (1999:145). Therefore deconstruction must involve deposition without any attendant repositioning. Delany explains that “deconstruction sets the oppositional terms in motion – and retains its force only as long as the terms remain in motion” (1999:146). This concept of ‘motion’ or ‘play’ is the engine of deconstruction, and becomes particularly relevant when deconstruction itself is the subject of analysis, and is transformed from an analytical process to a thematic object (Delany 1999:146). The word ‘object’ has to be used with caution, as deconstruction is more a process or dialogue than a thematic unity:

We are not defining our object of inquiry here because it is not an object; it is a vast and sprawling debate (or, better, a collection of debates), a great and often exciting dialogue, a wrangle between many voices, many writers ... (Delany 1999:178)

These “many writers” are, of course, unique individuals, all joining their voices to the dialogue of deconstruction. It can be argued that the individual is an example of a totalising theme, a will to mastery over a singular identity. But deconstruction has revealed that the constitutive elements of the individual function together to produce something greater than the sum of its parts. The individual is not an entity contained within the boundary of a body, but a web of interrelations linking it to the social matrix. The materiality of the body in its physical sense, and its immateriality in terms of the web of power relations of which it is the centre, create a complex dialogue that effectively deconstructs the individual as a totalising phenomenon. Delany comments:

I am the sweeping tapestry of my sensory and bodily perceptions. I am their linguistic reduction and abstraction, delayed and deferred till they form a wholly different order, called my thought. I am, at the behest and prompting of all these, my memory – which forms still another order. I am the emotions that hold them together. Webbing the four, and finally, I am the flux and filigree of desire around them all.¹⁵

Perhaps, though, I am only the interpretation of all of them – that I call reality. (Do I write with my pen? Does another daemon hold the pen and write

¹⁵ As Walt Whitman writes in *Song of Myself*:

I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,

For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you. (Whitman 1994: 27)

with it?) Am I the sexual surge and ebb that cannot quite be covered by any of the above, but that impinge on all the others and often drown them? What of the bodily apparati in general, as they fall, pleasingly or painfully, into the net of myself? I am always an animal excess to the intellectual system that tries to construct me. I am always a conscious sensibility in excess of the animal construction that is I. And that is why I am another, why my identity is always other than I.¹⁶ (1996:150)

The interplay between animality and intellectuality is important to Delany, as indicated by the Foucault quote that prefaces *The Mad Man*: “The *bios philosophicus* is the animality of being human, renewed as a challenge, practiced as an exercise – and thrown in the face of others as a scandal”. When Delany states that his identity “is always other than I”, he is referring to the web of power relations in which he is enmeshed, and the thematic structures woven out of these strands, such as the totalising statement that he is a gay, black SF writer. This statement is totalising in that it is meant to provide a definitional endpoint cutting off any further debate or discourse – containing a total thematic summation. But the concept of ‘play’ favoured by deconstruction has, as one of its aims (one certainly cannot claim a ‘main’ aim) the construction of new models, and the depositioning (as opposed to inversion) of old ones, in a constant process, or shimmer, of discourse:

Nothing we look at is ever seen without some shift and flicker – that constant flaking of vision which we take as imperfections of the eye or simply the instability of attention itself; and we ignore this illusory screen for the solid reality behind it. But the solid reality is the illusion; the shift and flicker is all there is. (Delany 1996: 254)

What, then, is the new model that can be constructed from the shift and flicker of discourse, bearing in mind that it has to go beyond simply revising an old model and rearranging or adjusting its elements? What is involved in a ‘radical’ position, as opposed to a conservative one – that is, one maintains the status quo of the current model? In terms of fiction, how can one progress beyond cliché and formula, especially in a genre such as SF, which is largely predicated on cliché and formula?

... it is the combination of fulfilling *and* violating structural expectations that makes fiction not just a craft, but an art. If there is a distinction to be made between good art and art that we think of as great, often it lies in the area of what structural expectations to violate. But the violation of expectations very

¹⁶ Dr Deirdre Byrne scribbled the following note after this: “Marginal comment. *Only* a man could oppose mind and body like this!”

quickly, over a period of ten or fifteen years, can turn into an expectation itself ... (Delany 1999:457)

The fulcrum of this shift and flicker between expectation and violation is the deconstructive notion of play as the lubricant of discourse, allowing meaning to slip and slide:

Play – play both in the sense of the slippages and imperfect fits that occur in both machines and in language, and in the sense of joy and playfulness, *jouissance* if you prefer, that leads the writer to let the language write him or her into meaning – and even a play of styles that has led more than one critic to comment that any truly intellectual performance is necessarily a comic act. (Delany 1999:184).

This sense of play is clearly evident in Delany's work, from the linguistic puzzle of an alien language that lacks the concept of the individual in *Babel-17*, the journal-within-a-novel circularity of *Dhalgren*, and the metafictional framing appendices of *Triton*, to the disclaimer of *The Mad Man*, and the gender inversions of *Stars*. 'Play' is also very much part of *The Motion of Light of Water*, where it produces the shimmer and flicker of discourse. Instead of illuminating Delany, and providing a capstone to his career and persona, it is refracted and recomplicated into this dazzling shimmer. What this 'shimmer' does is help to avoid reductionism in attempting to come to grips with Delany – that is, reducing him to the 'defining' elements of being a black, gay SF writer, as if this were the total sum of his identity.

A good metaphor to illustrate this elusive quality of play, which infuses the language that writes the writer into being, is provided by the section entitled 'A Dragon Hunt' from *Stars in my Pocket*, depicting Marq Dyeth and Rat Korga on a 'hunting trip'. Generic convention immediately lets the reader conceive of the classic British fox-and-hound scenario. But while Delany initially plays along with this convention, he contrasts it with details that dislocate the stereotype, and help dissolve the boundaries that anchor it in a particular discourse. In other words, he frees it so that play can suffuse the elements and cause them to shimmer or flicker.

'Well, while you are hunting dragons, I shall be hunting you. And maybe when we have finished our day, we can sing of our catch to one another.' Her paws came down on the warm soil. 'Remember, young hunter, as you aim through the sights and sails of your bow, I'll have you centred through my sights and sails.' (Delany 1984b:327)

The exotic phrase 'hunting dragons' takes on a more ominous note when Rat Korga is informed that he will be hunted at the same time, harking back to his time on Rhyonon when he was a slave and had similar treatment meted out to him. Korga infers from this that the Old Hunter is an avowed enemy, but Marq Dyeth inverts this assumption:

'She's our best friend in the world ... the Old Hunter, and hunters like her, are the reason that in *some* of the southern geosectors, evelmi and humans can live as one society.' (Delany 1986:328)

The Old Hunter's interest in the difference between evelmi and human, as evinced by her interest in Korga, forms the interface between the two opposing cultures. Therefore the predatory connotations of the word 'hunt' are transformed into the active assimilation of difference. When Korga finally settles the crosshairs of his bow on a dragon in flight, and pulls the trigger, he does not unleash death or destruction – the judgement of a superior culture on what it deems to be lesser animals – but 'merges' with the dragon, and shares its own perception of itself.¹⁷ Korga describes this startling wrench in awareness as 'throwing himself through himself' (1986:333), suggesting that he has transgressed his own bodily boundary, and entered the ontological domain of another being.

'I was a dragon...' he said, voiceless enough for a whisper. 'I was a dragon? ... I was a dragon! It was as if, for a moment, for a year, I was a dragon myself.' (Delany 1986:336)

Korga is unable to tell exactly how long the experience lasted, but is told it was probably no more than two to three seconds. Thus the temporality of the experience is in stark contrast to its totality. The Old Hunter equates the experience to reading a book, and informs Korga that he is obliged to 'sing of his catch' (1986:33). Marq Dyeth is worried that Korga, being unable to convey the full panoply of the experience, will upset some of the alien customs and practices that border this particular social interchange, but Korga shows a natural adaptability and willingness to learn. Marq Dyeth is forced to revise his view of Korga:

¹⁷ Delany explains the process: "'The radar-bow hooks on to a pretty complete mapping of the dragon's cerebral responses and, after a lot of translation, plays it back on your own cerebral surface'" (1986:33). In the best SF tradition, this is just vague and pseudo-scientific enough to seem authoritative.

... I realised that most of my fears for the stranger loose in the alien land were unnecessary. Whether he observed the proper information on his own, picked it up by whatever method from me, or figured it out on his fingers, whatever labour he laid to the task, the transition to my home world seemed for him no more than the rushed flights of gnats returning to the surface of some oil slick, perturbed perhaps because of the shifts in its rainbow colours, but still recognising the basic scents they had left it with when they had abandoned it in the morning. (Delany 1986:346-347)

The surface of the oil slick and its rainbow colours is reminiscent of the motion of light in water, and the shimmer or flicker of discourse. A further interesting feature of the dragon 'hunt' is the Old Hunter's description of it as reading a book. The sharp twist of cognitive dissonance that Korga experiences when he briefly 'becomes' the dragon seems an unlikely analogy for the reading process, but perhaps in SF terms what is meant is that 'alien' experiences such as the flight of a dragon can be 'shared' by the reader as communicated by the author. One can broaden the scope of this as a function of the genre: to acclimatise the reader to the shock of the new; to make him or her value the concept of difference, and the crucial role it plays in language, society and identity.

Becoming familiar with the alien or the strange means that eventually it will lose its differentiating quality. For example, each time Delany is labelled as a gay, black SF writer it reduces the very impact of that which distinguishes him from the mainstream or normative. Robert Reid-Pharr argues that "the paradox for the contemporary critic ... is that, just as the diversity underlying the label *Black, Gay Man* becomes increasingly evident, the desire to demonstrate and recognise that difference lessens" (1994:356). This is where difference and play are so crucial, for their rejuvenating as well as their deconstructive properties. Another interesting aspect of the dragon 'hunt' in *Stars* is the fact that these are creatures of appetite and desire, reminding one of the 'game' that the Winged Ones play with Kire at the end of *They Fly at Çiron*:

... the nerve endings concentrated in the flesh below the joint of wing and body is of the same order as those in the human genitals or the lining of the human ear: the stimulation of rushing air excites them – the sensation dying at precisely the rate (established by ages of evolution) to make the wings flap enough for lift-off. A permanent around-the-body high? Fly! I flew. (Delany 1986:334)

The “gentle bodily urging towards certain kinds of motion” seems to result in behaviour that, to human eyes, is “like a creature satisfying a ravenous appetite” (1986:335). Appetite is an important part of both desire and discourse:

The body’s social function, like the social function of art, or education, is largely a discourse. And that side of the discourse that concerns sex, desire, and the anxieties connected with them both is ravenously appetitive. (Delany 1992:4)

In *The Mad Man*, Delany writes of ‘pornotopia’, which he defines as “simply *the* ‘sexual place’ – the place where all can become (apocalyptically) sexual” (1999:133). The apocalypse refers to ‘ekpyrosis’, that Heraclitean fire that quenches all differentiation, or the heterotopia that desiccates language and unbinds it from its ensnaring web of unlimited semiosis, turning the world into a tabula rasa. Such a totalising conflagration is necessary – though this brings one back to the danger of thematics as the representative of hierarchy and authoritarianism – if only to remind one that “desire lies like a bodily boundary between the everyday and the unspeakable”, and that “the unspeakable is always in the column you are not reading” (Delany 1999:65). Delany explains in a (non-) summary of his oeuvre:

What I have done here is told you a story, a fiction, several fictions in fact. I’ve given them a more or less systematic presentation, held together by certain ~~themes~~ ... which is to say that they will serve us only if we realise they are too simple. Too many things have been left out, too many questions remain, not enough history and socially stabilising institutions have been examined ... (Delany 1999:185)

In the skies overhead, dragons yearn toward motion. Behind us in the margin of the margin, which has no centre, stands the Author, multiply refracted, breathing language as if it were air, writing us and the world into being. Gently Delany puts his hands on our shoulders, guiding the crosshairs as we aim at the sky. In a single fluid motion that ripples like light through water, we are in flight.

And for one glorious instant, we are unbounded.

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